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THE MELBOURNE RING CYCLE 2013

OPERA AUSTRALIA

DATES

	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
<i>Das Rheingold</i>	7pm Monday 18 November	7pm Wednesday 27 November	7pm Friday 6 December
<i>Die Walküre</i>	5pm Wednesday 20 November	5pm Friday 29 November	5pm Monday 9 December
<i>Siegfried</i>	5pm Friday 22 November	5pm Monday 2 December	5pm Wednesday 11 December
<i>Götterdämmerung</i>	4pm Monday 25 November	4pm Wednesday 4 December	4pm Friday 13 December
<i>Das Rheingold</i>	7pm - 9.40pm 2 hours and 40 minutes	no interval _	
<i>Die Walküre</i>	5pm - 10.35pm 5 hours and 35 minutes	75 minutes 30 minutes	
<i>Siegfried</i>	5pm - 10.35pm 5 hours and 35 minutes	75 minutes 30 minutes	
<i>Götterdämmerung</i>	4pm - 11pm 7 hours	90 minutes 35 minutes	

TICKET PRICE PER CYCLE

Premium	\$2000
A Res	\$1600
B Res	\$1200
C Res	\$1000

ARTS CENTRE MELBOURNE



Arts Centre Melbourne is located at 100 St Kilda Road, Southbank 3004.

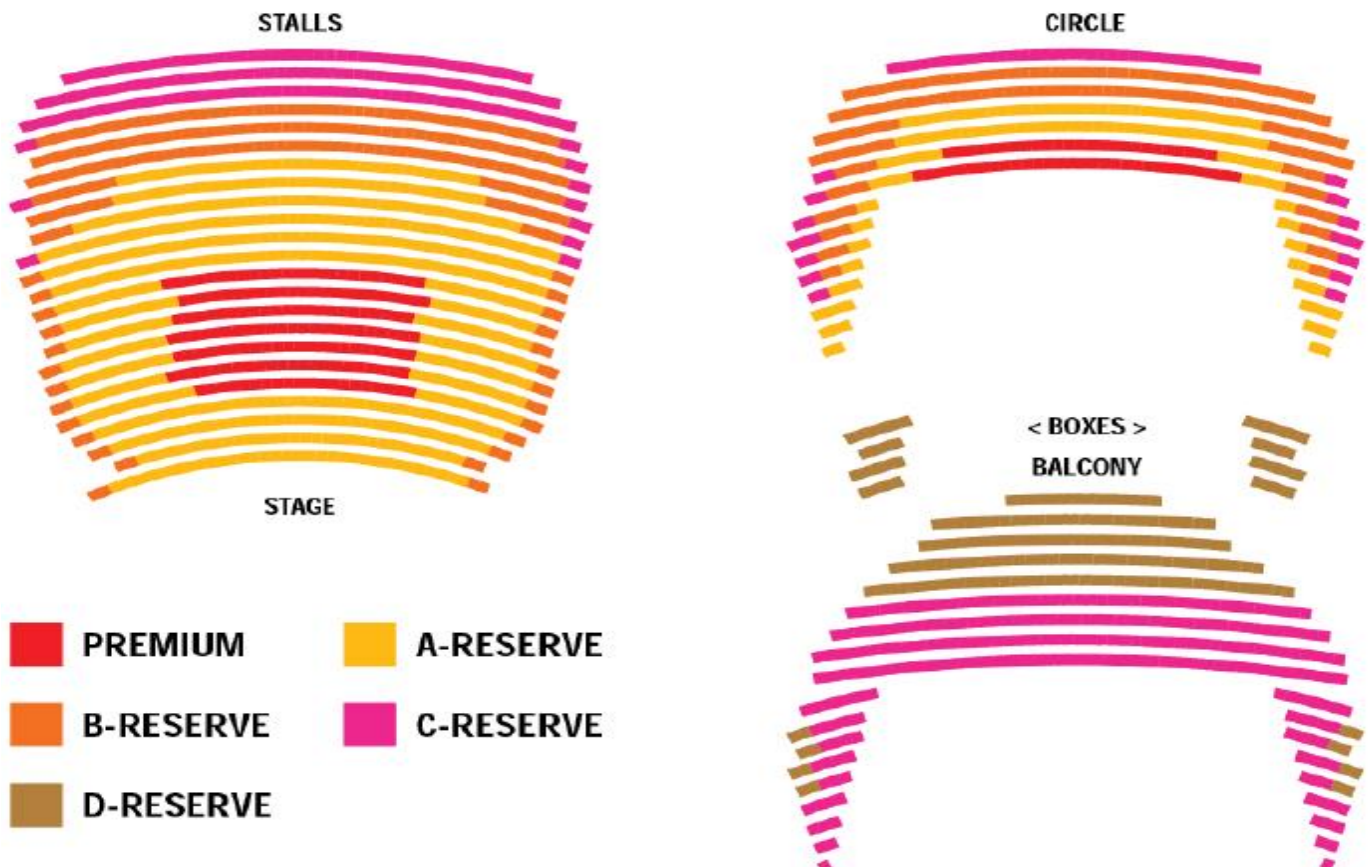
Arts Centre Melbourne is Australia's largest performing arts centre and the focal point of Melbourne's cultural precinct.

Each year it hosts the Melbourne seasons of the national and state music, opera, theatre and dance companies.

Theatre

The Melbourne Ring Cycle will be performed in the State Theatre, the largest lyric theatre stage in the Southern Hemisphere.

State-of-the-art and renowned for its luxurious interiors, the State Theatre is being further enhanced with the expansion of the orchestra pit to accommodate up to 110 musicians. This new flexibility will enable performances of a scale and variety that cannot be staged anywhere else in Australia. The Melbourne Ring Cycle will be the first production to reveal the thrilling full-sized Wagnerian orchestral sound that this theatre can produce.



THE MELBOURNE RING ORCHESTRA



In bringing Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* to life in Melbourne, Opera Australia (OA) has created a festival of orchestral sound to celebrate this monumental work.

The Melbourne Ring Orchestra will unite 135 musicians from a wealth of local, national and international sources.

OA's Melbourne performance partner, Orchestra Victoria, and its regular casual musicians will be joined by guest players from 9 other orchestras: the Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra (OA's Sydney orchestra); the Sydney, Melbourne, Queensland, Tasmanian, and West Australian Symphony orchestras; the Orchestra of Beethovenhalle Bonn; the Lucerne Symphony; and the Oslo Philharmonic.

CO-CONCERT MASTERS Roger Jonsson * (*Das Rheingold, Siegfried*)
 Aubrey Murphy (*Die Walküre; Götterdämmerung*)

VIOLINS

Yi Wang *
 Erica Kennedy *
 Tomomi Brennan *
 Anja Röhn e
 Matt Hassall *
 Roy Theaker
 Elizabeth Ambrose *
 Jessica Bell
 Binny Baik *
 Alyssa Conrau
 Julien Dupont
 Lubino Fernandes *
 Freya Franzen
 Rachel Gamer *
 Kirsty Greig
 Rachael Hunt *
 Yu-Qing Rebecca Irwin o
 Ceridwen Jones *
 Edwina Kayser
 Mara Miller *
 Philip Nixon *
 John Noble *
 Ruby Paskas
 Alison Rayner ~
 Lynette Rayner
 Martin Reddington *
 Matthew Rigby
 Christine Ruiters *
 Charlotte Ryseenbeek
 Oksana Thompson

OBOE

Stephen Robinson *
 Joshua De Graaf *
 Jessica Foot
 Sebastien Robinson

COR ANGLAIS

Dafydd Camp*
 Geoffrey Dodd

CLARINET

Paul Champion *
 Richard Sholl *
 Robin Henry
 David Griffith

BASS CLARINET

Andrew Mitchell *
 Nicholas Evans

BASSOON

Matthew Ockenden o
 Tahnee Van Herk *
 Hugh Ponnuthurai
 Oscar Garrido De La Rosa

HORN

Jasen Moulton *
 Geoffrey Winter x
 Evgeny Chebykin
 Heather McMahon *
 Linda Hewett *
 Lauren Manuel *
 Heath Parkinson o
 Lisa Wynne-Allen o

WAGNER TUBA / HORN

Claire Tyrell
Olga Vakoussevitch
Tim Veldman
Rachel Westwood °
Stephanie Zarka

VIOLA

Paul McMillan *
Lawrence Jacks *
Suying Aw
Catherine Bishop *
Merewyn Bramble
Jason Bunn *
Nadine Delbridge *
Thomas Higham
Raymond Hope *
Isabel Morse
Christian Read
Cora Teeuwen
Shani Williams

CELLI

Melissa Chominsky *
Diane Froomes *
Josephine Vains
Rachel Atkinson
Alister Barker
Sarah Cuming *
Philippa Gardner *
Rosanne Hunt
Charlotte Jacke
Molly Kadarauch
Anna Orzech
Tania Hardy-Smith *
Andrea Taylor *
Zoe Wallace
Paul Zabrowarny *

BASSI

Davin Holt *
Dennis Vaughan *
Stuart Riley
Kylie Davis
Matthew Thorne *
Miranda Hill
Nic Synot
Lowri Morgan
Hugh Kluger
Emma Sullivan

FLUTE

Lisa Maree-Amos *
Derek Jones
Lorraine Bradbury *
Melissa Doecke

PICCOLO

Michael Smith *
Michael Waye ‡

Anton Schroeder *
Georgia Ioakamidis-McDougall
Julia Brooke ‡
Marnie Sebire ~

TRUMPET

Mark Fitzpatrick *
Anthony Pope *
Josh Rogan
Mark Skillington *

BASS TRUMPET

Matthew Allison ^

TROMBONE

Scott Evans *
Anthony Gilham *

BASS TROMBONE

William Farmer °

CONTRABASS TROMBONE

Eric Klay ∞

TUBA

Jonathan Woods *

TIMPANI

Guy Du Blêt *
David Clarence °

PERCUSSION

Conrad Nilsson *
Paul Sablinskis *
Daniel Richardson
Greg Sully

HARP

Mary Anderson *
Delyth Stafford
Jacinta Dennett
Alannah Guthrie Jones
Yinou Mu
Jessica Fotinos

OFF-STAGE

Jasen Moulton *, *Geoffrey Winter* ×,
Evgeny Chebykin, *Heath Parkinson* ♂,
Lisa Wynne-Allen ° (Horn)
Ian Bell, Ben Anderson (Stierhorn)
Stephen Robinson * (Cor Anglais)
Conrad Nilsson *, Greg Sully,
Jennifer Morrish (Percussion)

Orchestra Victoria *

Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra °
The Beethoven Orchestra of Bonn ×
Lucerne Symphony Orchestra ε
Melbourne Symphony Orchestra ∞
New Zealand Symphony Orchestra ^
Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra ~
Queensland Symphony Orchestra *
Sydney Symphony Orchestra ~
Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra ♂
West Australian Symphony Orchestra ‡
Italics denotes Principal Player

THE CREATIVE TEAM AND CAST

In 2013 the Melbourne Ring Cycle will bring together an inspired cast of outstanding Wagnerian artists from around the world, led by an acclaimed Australian creative team.



Neil Armfield, Director

"[The Ring is] perhaps the greatest single work of the human imagination. I hope to bring to it simplicity and clarity, a playful love of story, a meaningful sense of spectacle and an utterly ravishing theatricality."

Set Designer

Costume Designer

Lighting Designer

Conductor

Associate Conductor

Associate Director

Robert Cousins

Alice Babidge

Damien Cooper

Pietari Inkinen

Anthony Legge

Kate Champion

The Cast

ARTIST	ROLE/S	OPERA/S
<u>Jud Arthur</u>	Fafner, Hunding	<i>Das Rheingold</i> <i>Die Walküre</i> <i>Siegfried</i>
<u>Richard Berkeley-Steele</u>	Loge	<i>Das Rheingold</i>
<u>Andrew Brunsdon</u>	Froh	<i>Das Rheingold</i>
<u>Susan Bullock</u>	Brünnhilde	<i>Die Walküre</i> <i>Siegfried</i> <i>Götterdämmerung</i>
<u>Elizabeth Campbell</u>	Grimgerde, First Norn	<i>Die Walküre</i> <i>Götterdämmerung</i>
<u>Jacqueline Dark</u>	Fricka, Second Norn	<i>Das Rheingold</i> <i>Die Walküre</i> <i>Götterdämmerung</i>
<u>Jane Ede</u>	Wellgunde	<i>Das Rheingold</i> <i>Götterdämmerung</i>
<u>Taryn Fiebig</u>	Forest Bird	<i>Siegfried</i>
<u>Warwick Fyfe</u>	Alberich	<i>Das Rheingold</i> <i>Siegfried</i> <i>Götterdämmerung</i>
<u>Miriam Gordon-Stewart</u>	Sieglinde	<i>Die Walküre</i>
<u>Lorina Gore</u>	Woglinde	<i>Das Rheingold</i> <i>Götterdämmerung</i>
<u>Roxane Hislop</u>	Rossweisse	<i>Die Walküre</i>
<u>Anke Höppner</u>	Gerhilde, Third Norn	<i>Die Walküre</i> <i>Götterdämmerung</i>
<u>Deborah Humble</u>	Erda, Waltraute	<i>Das Rheingold</i> <i>Die Walküre</i> <i>Siegfried</i> <i>Götterdämmerung</i>

<u>Hyeseoung Kwon</u>	Freia, Helmwige	<i>Das Rheingold</i>
<u>Stefan Vinke</u>	Siegfried	<i>Die Walküre</i>
<u>Shane Lowrencev</u>	Fafner	<i>Siegfried</i>
<u>Graeme Macfarlane</u>	Mime	<i>Götterdämmerung</i>
<u>Dominica Matthews</u>	Flosshilde, Schwertleite	<i>Das Rheingold</i>
		<i>Siegfried</i>
		<i>Das Rheingold</i>
		<i>Siegfried</i>
		<i>Das Rheingold</i>
		<i>Die Walküre,</i>
		<i>Götterdämmerung</i>
		<i>Das Rheingold</i>
<u>Andrew Moran</u>	Donner	
<u>Sian Pendry</u>	Siegrune	<i>Die Walküre</i>
<u>Sharon Prero</u>	Gutrune	<i>Götterdämmerung</i>
<u>Merlyn Quaife</u>	Ortlinde	<i>Die Walküre</i>
<u>Barry Ryan</u>	Gunther	<i>Götterdämmerung</i>
<u>Stuart Skelton</u>	Sigmund	<i>Die Walküre</i>
<u>Daniel Sumegi</u>	Fasolt, Hagen	<i>Das Rheingold</i>
<u>Terje Stensvold</u>	Wotan, The Wanderer	<i>Götterdämmerung</i>
		<i>Das Rheingold</i>
		<i>Die Walküre</i>
		<i>Siegfried</i>

THE RING GALA DINNER

This month Opera Australia will bring Wagner's Ring Cycle to the stage at the Arts Centre Melbourne. To celebrate this significant moment, we will be holding a Gala Dinner on the eve of the season to raise important funds for Opera Australia.

We have created an innovative, thrilling and – most importantly – entertaining evening. Expect dynamic performances, including our own **Taryn Fiebig, Kate Miller-Heidke, David Kram** and a few surprises on the night.

Your night will be completed with a champagne reception, an exquisite three-course dinner matched with premium wines, luxury gift bag, our new Chief Executive, **Craig Hassall**, as Master of Ceremonies, and special guest, the internationally renowned **Geoffrey Robertson QC**.

Also includes a gallery of artworks for sale, an exclusive live auction and a luxury tombola – with the opportunity to bid on a **Bill Henson work** from his famous 'Paris Opera Project' series, a **luxurious opera holiday** around Wagner's homeland of Germany, an exclusive dinner with **former Premier of Victoria The Hon Jeffrey Kennett AC, Jonas Kauffman** experience, or a **walk on role** in Opera Australia's production of *Carmen*.

This event will be a fitting spectacle and a memorable part of Opera Australia's history.

Join us in making history at the very first Ring Gala Dinner!

Date Sunday 17 November 2013

Time 6.30pm - 10.30pm

Venue The Great Hall, National Gallery of Victoria, 180 St Kilda Rd, Southbank, VIC 3006

Dress Evening Dress - Glamorous, Special and Celebratory.

Wagner's Ring brings new life, but fear is ever present

GEOFFREY ROBERTSON, [THE AUSTRALIAN](#), NOVEMBER 16, 2013 12:00AM



John Brocheler as Wotan in the State Opera of South Australia's production of Die Walkure in 2004.

Picture: Peter Holderness Source: *The Australian*

'I meant in the presentation of the whole Nibelung myth to show how, from the first wrongdoing, a whole world of injustice arose, and subsequently fell to pieces, in order to teach us the lesson that we must recognise injustice and tear it up by the roots and raise in its stead a righteous world.' -- Richard Wagner, in a letter to August Rockel, August 23, 1856

JOHN Mortimer always said he was glad he did not discover Wagner until he was older than 60, otherwise he would have spent many months of his life Ring-cycling" (which would have been his only exercise).

Not that the epic is suitable only for the aged: this (northern) summer's Proms performance, conducted by the incomparable Daniel Barenboim with his 137-strong Staatskapelle Berlin, received ovations from thousands of young people standing for almost as long as it would take them to fly to Australia. And that was merely a concert performance.

This music tingles the spine and the brain at the same time when it is dramatised. Der Ring des Nibelung is the ultimate in operatic experiences, drawing any audience prepared to engage with what Wagner called "the emotionalisation of the intellect" into a cruel, god-ridden world that is about to end and (possibly) to begin again, with a humanitarian order in which individuals have learned moral responsibility.

This might seem a portentous way of describing what to lawyers would be an all-too-familiar dispute over a building contract. The god Wotan has lots of freeloading children and relatives, so hires the giant firm of Fasolt & Fafner Ltd to build a skyscraper to house them.

The contract, negotiated by Loge, his cunning but sleazy lawyer, provides that if he can't pay on completion, he forfeits his sister-in-law to provide sexual services

indefinitely to the builders. Loge is hurriedly summoned to find a loophole in the deal: he suggests expropriation of gold from Alberich, leader of the Nibelungen, which may not be considered theft since Alberich has stolen the means of making it from some women who were swimming in the Rhine.

In Australia, stealing from a thief counts as theft, but old Norse law was based on tit-for-tat and we are in very early times -- the earliest, in fact. The effect of that low, E-flat note on the double basses, followed individually by the horns, at the opening of Das Rheingold, announces the creation of life. Wotan, it will much later emerge, is the god whose craving for power was attained by etiolating that creative force, ring-barking the world ash tree and leaving him only with the wisdom to will his own doom.

The pulling power of the Ring -- the chemistry that draws aficionados back time and again to find fresh enrichment in its luminous fusion of music and myth, drama and philosophy, stems from the psychological depth of its characters, revealed in a complexity beyond the capability of any other composer poet.

Primitive demigods these people may be, fighting and loving and outwitting one another at the beginning of the sentient world, but their emotions, social rules and moral dilemmas are those of Wagner's time, and of ours. They possess some rough magic: a golden helmet

(the Tarnhelm), Donner's thunder-hammer and the lethal tip of Wotan's spear, comparable to the power of the internet and the tip of a nuclear missile. But they make as much of a mess of their lives as we do.

Take Wotan's opening dilemma: he is ruler of human society, a noble politician who owes his status and respect to his enforcement of the laws ("runes") that he enshrines on his spear. *Pacta servanda sunt*: contracts must be obeyed and solemn promises kept. But his megalomaniac insistence on constructing a heaven to which war heroes can aspire (like devoted jihadists) requires a deceitful deal with the only giants who can build it.

Extricating himself from that bargain will demean and diminish him, just as Obama's failure to deliver on closing Guantanamo or Gillard's failure to junk the carbon tax shows modern politicians unable to cope with a catch-22 of their own making. Gods cannot have their heaven and their eternal youth from Freia's golden apples: the hollow triumphal march across the rainbow bridge at the end of *Das Rheingold* presages their doom. Wotan soon learns from earth mother Erda, in Act II of *Die Walkure*, that the time for gods and for human beings to have illusions about the existence of gods is almost up. He wills his own death, but hopes that Siegmund, his son, can save humanity by recapturing the ring and returning the gold to nature, in the form of the river nymphs. But that creates a new dilemma: Siegmund must die, for love has led him to break another of the pettifogging rules on Wotan's spear: "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (or, in this case, the double whammy: Thou shalt not commit adultery and incest).

There seems no way out of this catch-44, although Brunnhilde disobediently finds one: she cannot save Siegmund, but she can save his son, conceived in that last night of consanguineous passion, an orchestral orgasm that explodes at the end of Act I of *Die Walkure*. Brunnhilde's punishment is to sleep surrounded by fire until a love-smitten hero awakes her with a kiss.

It sounds very Snow White, but Wotan's farewell to his daughter builds to one of the most moving set pieces in all opera, an exploration of the most poignant emotion we are capable of feeling, for the loss of a loved one.

In Siegfried, the eponymous hero is an autistic teenager who knows no fear and is lured by the sensuousness of the birdsong to win Brunnhilde at the ecstatic climax of the last act, reprised at the opening of *Götterdämmerung*. It is then that we learn the full story from the Norns, the spinners of fate -- and like Wotan we now know that the gods have no future.

What Wagner saves to the end is whether the fire that consumes Valhalla is merely the end of the gods (goodbye to superstition, militarism and oppression) or an end to the world as well.

We are in the hands, let us always remember, of a revolutionary creative genius, out to challenge the

injustices of a mid-19th-century Europe where power over people was wielded by unforgiving churches, over-powerful armies and a privileged class of plutocrats, whose inherited wealth was multiplied by ownership of industry.

Wagner revolted not only in thought but in deed, standing on the barricades of Dresden in 1849 shoulder to shoulder with anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, who went to prison. Wagner, proclaimed in a "wanted" police poster as "a politically dangerous person", escaped to Switzerland, where during the next few years he wrote the entire libretto of the Ring. He wrote under the philosophical sway of Ludwig Feuerbach, who held that all religion was fantasy, albeit a necessary fantasy for a human race that had nothing to build on other than nature. God did not create man; man had created God for comfort in his life and imagined heaven to relieve his fear of death. Thus, the end of the gods would provide the opportunity for individuals to evolve as humanitarians, to respect nature and to restrain the industrialists who despoiled it in their insatiable greed.

Revolutionaries could then succeed in tearing down the petty and unjust rules of the state and the church, then would learn to love one another, and then die.

Wagner later became disillusioned with revolutionary politics -- the god that failed -- and became immersed in the gloomy thinking of Arthur Schopenhauer, a pronounced atheist, who held that life was a tragedy, politics petty and that nothing really mattered. He analysed life in much the same way as Hobbes -- it was short, brutish and nasty -- but instead of concluding that a state leviathan was necessary to put it in order, he argued that state control made it even worse. Its only consolations were art and sex, and attaining the wisdom to wish for death. That, of course, is Wotan's achieved wisdom in the Ring and hence Wagner's dilemma in ending *Götterdämmerung*: is it to offer the hope of a better life or the hope of no life at all?

I favour the first (the so-called "Feuerbach ending"), which chimes with the optimistic and iconoclastic philosophy of the younger Wagner. In this, the original version, Brunnhilde, who is about to immolate herself and become the human torch that will set Valhalla alight, tells the mysterious "watchers" that once they have observed Valhalla's end and the return of the ring to the Rhine:

***Though the race of gods passed away like a breath,
though I leave behind me a world without rulers, I now
bequeath to that world my most sacred wisdom's hoard.
Not wealth, not gold, not godly pomp; not troubled
treaties, treacherous bonds, not smooth-tongued
custom's stern decree: blessed in joy and sorrow love
alone can be.***

These words, written in 1852, sum up Wagner's original conception of the Ring as an attack on the injustice produced by the stultification and inhumanity of the church and courts, and the political and social tyrannies of the time, which must be overcome by disbelief and

replaced by love. Later, under the bleak influence of Schopenhauer, he had Brunnhilde find her redemption in the realisation ("I saw the world end") that there will be no life after death for anyone other than nature.

Eventually he decided to cut these alternative soliloquies and leave the audience to find its own emotional meaning. We become the watchers observing on stage the pyromania at the end of *Götterdämmerung*. What do we make of the return of the ring, of the ravens that wing towards Valhalla bearing its suicide note, of Brunnhilde's fiery self-sacrifice and the stoicism with which the gods face their immolation? Will this mean a better world without God or the destruction of a humanity that has failed to learn a worthy way to live?

I am by nature optimistic, but as the cast takes its bows I cannot help noticing that the two unaccounted for after the fire are Loge and Alberich: the seedy lawyer and the fallen tyrant. They will return, I fear, to pervert any new world that tries to live by love alone.

So, inevitably, on to Wagner, Hitler and the Jews. Wagner's music still goes unplayed in Israel. Should any art that succeeds in its own terms, as art, go unappreciated because the artist held despicable views? I was brought up by Leavisites at Sydney University to value literature for its own sake, never raising my eyes from the text. I read Virginia Woolf and DH Lawrence, and only later read their diaries, which express the wish to have the mentally ill consigned to gas chambers -- they were advocates of the perverted eugenics craze that captured the imagination of the Left, as well as of Hitler, between the wars.

Many great artists are cruel in their private life and have expressed deplorable opinions fashionable in their time: the real issue is whether these traits are discernible in their work or in its message. I can detect no anti-Semitism at all in the Ring: the character of Mime, the duplicitous dwarf, is sometimes a candidate, but he exhibits the kind of greed shown by all who sit hypocritically at the bedside of a dying relative in the hope of an inheritance. Bringing up Siegfried, a Jewish mother he is not.

Wagner overreacted to everything in his writings, which are sometimes viciously anti-Semitic (although he regretted this towards the end of his life). His musical dramas, however, were tightly controlled, with stage and character directions that said what he meant. It is inconceivable that if he wanted Mime to be thought of as a Jew, he would not have said so. As for young Siegfried, so often identified as the epitome of Hitler's master race, it took WH Auden to point out that his low IQ (a result of incest?) and erratic behaviour hardly make him the prototype for a superman.

The only character with any resemblance to Hitler is the megalomaniac tyrant Alberich, unconstrained by the rules and treaties that Wotan must honour, happy to renounce love and enslave his own people to satisfy his lust for total power and unnecessary wealth. Hitler

would not have noticed the parallel or acted differently (art has its limits) if he had.

I am the last person to blame a man for the excesses of his wife, but it must be conceded that Cosima after Wagner's death turned Bayreuth into a festival that would be receptive to Nazi ideology. She was prepared to hire Jewish conductors, singers and musicians only if Aryan equivalents were unavailable. Their daughter married an odious English racist whose writings were influential and who met and blessed Hitler. Wagner's son, Siegfried (of course), was gay and covered by marrying Winifred, a Welsh orphan with an anti-Semitic streak, who fell in love with Hitler and asked him "home" to Bayreuth so often her children knew him as "Uncle Wolf".

But it is important to recognise (and Israel should take note) that, as late as 1929, Otto Klemperer was conducting Wagner at the Jewish-dominated Kroll Opera House in Berlin (I am inordinately proud of this, since I am descended from Joseph Kroll) and it was only rabid nationalists who protested.

Wagner is not responsible for Hitler and although the Nazis did exploit his musical legend, there was nothing in his operas that suggested or inspired the Holocaust. It is amusing to read accounts of the senior party members dragged by the Führer to sit for six hours in the seats at Bayreuth (which are even harder than those at the Sydney Opera House). These thugs were not interested in classical music -- they yawned and dozed and scratched, and dreamed only of how to slink away to the beer halls and brothels of Bayreuth. [Robertson is here projecting upon others his own degeneracy – F.T.]

The worst of the "cultured" Nazis, such as Josef Mengele, preferred to listen to Schubert. German armies never went into battle to the strains of *The Ride of the Valkyries*, like the US helicopter attack in Vietnam depicted in *Apocalypse Now*. Their musical inspiration was *The Horst Wessel Song*. I have sometimes wondered whether, had Hitler not driven away Germany's Jewish scientists, they might have developed a nuclear weapon by the time he was forced into the bunker: one imagines him playing *Götterdämmerung* while ordering atom bombs to be dropped on London. That image dissolves in the face of the fact Hitler lost interest in Wagner during the war, in favour of Franz Lehar. The opera that consoled him in the bunker was Lehar's *The Merry Widow*. [These are indeed the words of a fantasist and fabricator who projects his own moral bankruptcy upon an historical period – ed. A.I.]

Nonetheless, in Wagner's 200th anniversary year, it is right to remember the victims of the Holocaust, a crime that was eventually punished by human justice at Nuremberg. At nearby Bayreuth, in the garden beside the Festspielhaus, the nettle has been grasped: an exhibition, *Silent Voices*, has pictures and biographies of the Jewish singers and musicians who performed there in the decades before they were murdered in the camps,

with an eloquent apologia for those hideous heirs of Wagner who used his festival to support anti-Semitic and anti-democratic organisations in Germany. The best way to guard against the return of Alberich is to remember just how close the Nibelungen came, in 1939 to 1945, to recapturing their ring, with its power to rule the world.

*This is an edited extract from **Dreaming Too Loud: Reflections on a Race Apart**, by Geoffrey Robertson (Vintage Australia). Robertson will be a special guest at Opera Australia's Ring cycle gala dinner tomorrow night- [where he presented this essay as his talk – ed. AI.]*

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/stage/ring-brings-new-life-but-fear-is-ever-present/story-fn9d344c-1226761290061>



Fredrick Töben comments:

What a pity that Geoffrey Robertson's final comment is so banal, much like his affected quick dash to the dais during which some dinner guests were wondering if that toupee of his would ultimately fall off his head.

It seems as if he fears old age and has the need to affect youthful vigour. His checkered jacket made him look like a carnival jester and his pretentious legal gravitas seemed at odds even with his Erda-like wife's serious demeanour.

Robertson's comment about Wagner's alleged "anti-Semitism" misses the point that Wagner's favourite conductor was still Levi and one of the pallbearers at his funeral was Jewish.

Wagner was critical of human behaviour as such, and it mattered not whether the persons were English or

German, Christian or Jew. Individuals who use the concept as a derogatory label, which it has become, fail to make this distinction, i.e. it is the behaviour – in thought and deed – displayed that is being criticised.

We should, however, always remember that the Jewish Bolsheviks – Genrick Yagoda's secret police who perpetrated upon the Russians the greatest mass murder of all times, over ten million people – criminalised the concepts "anti-Semite" and "revisionist" in 1917 in Soviet Russia – the latter by sending accused to the slave labour camps and the former by having them shot. In this way the concept "anti-Semite" protected Jewish interests from open criticism, just as is happening again today when it is important to criticise Jewish behaviour, for example, in Palestine.

His comment that he cannot find any anti-Semitism in the Ring is, of course, spot-on. In any case, Wagner was too much of a universal genius to be limited by such a nonsense concept.

Anyone who uses this concept, however, in order publicly to decry an appreciation of Wagner's creative genius reveals more of their own personal blind spots – or to use the latest buzz concept to describe such a mindset: **committing a bias crime**. This is especially the case when we attempt to assess what that relationship between Wagner's music and Adolf Hitler was all about.

Current prevailing mindsets in our free and democratic western world cannot let Adolf Hitler sleep. When it comes to genocidal matter – crimes against humanity – they cannot even bring themselves to mention Jewish Genrick Yagoda who led the Bolshevik extermination program in the Soviet Union.

Robertson's comment on matters Holocaust, which he called "*a crime that was eventually punished by human justice at Nuremberg*" is thus a total distortion of what justice is all about.

I find it incomprehensible that he, as a legal advocate, can condone what happened at Nuremberg where anyone now familiar with Guantanamo Bay justice knows full well that there was no defence available to the accused.

Also, his involvement in setting up the Iraqi tribunals that hanged Saddam Hussein, is a further sign of Robertson endorsing victors' justice, which may also be tinged with revenge, envy and other such base human motives emanating from the application of the Talmudic-Marxist-feminist mindset.

Richard Wagner's Weltanschauung/world-view, as expressed in his operas, and as commented upon by Robertson in his dinner address would place Robertson into the nether world inhabited by Alberich with pretensions of possibly emerging therefrom and reaching for Valhalla's promises.



The University Librarian, Mr Philip Kent,
has much pleasure in inviting you to the launch of

Becoming Wagnerites
**RICHARD
WAGNER**
1813–1883
and Australia

A Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library Exhibition

Thursday 5 December 2013
3:00pm – 5:00pm

Dulcie Hollyock Room, Ground floor, Baillieu Library
The University of Melbourne



The exhibition will be launched by Heath Lees,
Emeritus Professor of Music, University of Auckland

Becoming Wagnerites is part of the Melbourne Ring Festival
presented by Opera Australia and the City of Melbourne
www.melbournerringcycle.com.au/festival/

The exhibition is also a partner of the 'Wagner and Us'
Symposium, University of Melbourne, 5–8 December 2013
www.wagnerandus.com.au/

Refreshments will be served

RSVP by Friday 29 November 2013
online <http://go.unimelb.edu.au/6ssn>
or by phone 03 8344 4219

This exhibition has been supported with a grant from the Cultural and
Community Relations Advisory Group (CCRAG), Office of the Deputy
Vice-Chancellor (Engagement), The University of Melbourne.

Front image: **Unknown artist**, illustration
of "Lohengrin" from "The Month"
Australasian sketcher, 5.59, 29 September
1877 (detail) (Special Collections, Baillieu
Library, University of Melbourne)



MELBOURNE RING FESTIVAL | 15 NOV - 13 DEC

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Bugs Vs Wagner Twice Daily at various times
 Backstage Tours 11am Daily (9 November- 13 December, except Fridays)
 Various Exhibitions Daily – see program for times

NOVEMBER

FRI 15	2pm Film: Lessons of Darkness	3:30pm Talk: Underscoring: Wagner's Influence on Film
SAT 16	1pm Opening Event: Arrival of the Valkyries (FREE)	9pm Festival Hub: City of Melbourne Festspielhaus (FREE)
SUN 17	6:30pm Ring Gala Dinner	
MON 18	10:30am Ring Cycle Pre-Performance Talks 2pm Film: Wagner and Me	Cycle 1: Das Rheingold
TUE 19	10am – 5pm Ring Cycle Jewellery Day of Discovery 7:30pm Talk: The Cult of Wagner	7:30pm Performance: The Ring: Wagner Animated
WED 20	10:30am Ring Cycle Pre-Performance Talks 2pm Film: Wagner and Me	Cycle 1: Die Walküre
THU 21	7:30pm Performance: Great Operatic Choruses	9pm Festival Hub: City of Melbourne Festspielhaus (FREE)
FRI 22	10:30am Ring Cycle Pre-Performance Talks 11am Opera in the Roses 2pm Film: Lessons of Darkness	9pm Festival Hub: City of Melbourne Festspielhaus (FREE) Cycle 1: Siegfried
SAT 23	5pm Performance: The Ring in a Ring Arena Spectacular 8pm Special Event: Mazda Opera in the Bowl (FREE)	9pm Festival Hub: City of Melbourne Festspielhaus (FREE)
SUN 24	10am Insight Talk 12 noon Laneway Lunch with Wagner 5pm Performance: The Ring in a Ring Arena Spectacular	6:30pm Debate: Can Art and Politics be Separated? 7:30pm Performance: Mnozil Brass-Hojotoho
MON 25	10:30am Ring Cycle Pre-Performance Talks	Cycle 1: Götterdämmerung
TUE 26	10am – 5pm Ring Cycle Jewellery Day of Discovery	
WED 27	10:30am Ring Cycle Pre-Performance Talks	Cycle 2: Das Rheingold
THU 28	12 noon & 5pm Performance: The Rington Cycle 7:30pm Performance: Great Operatic Choruses	9pm Festival Hub: City of Melbourne Festspielhaus (FREE)
FRI 29	10:30am Ring Cycle Pre-Performance Talks	9pm Festival Hub: City of Melbourne Festspielhaus (FREE) Cycle 2: Die Walküre
SAT 30	12 noon Performance: The Rington Cycle 3pm & 7:30pm Performance: The Ring: Wagner Animated 5pm Performance: The Ring in a Ring Arena Spectacular	8pm Performance: Tutti 9pm Festival Hub: City of Melbourne Festspielhaus (FREE)

DECEMBER

SUN 1	10am Insight Talk 12 noon Laneway Lunch with Wagner	12 noon & 5pm Performance: The Rington Cycle 5pm Performance: The Ring in a Ring Arena Spectacular
MON 2	10:30am Ring Cycle Pre-Performance Talks	Cycle 2: Siegfried
TUE 3	6:30pm Performance: The Kid by Michael Gow	10am – 5pm Ring Cycle Jewellery Day of Discovery
WED 4	10:30am Ring Cycle Pre-Performance Talks	Cycle 2: Götterdämmerung
THU 5	11am & 6:30pm Performance: The Ring: Wagner: Animated 5pm Symposium: Wagner and Us	9pm Festival Hub: City of Melbourne Festspielhaus (FREE)
FRI 6	10:30am Ring Cycle Pre-Performance Talks 11am Symposium: Wagner and Us	Cycle 3: Das Rheingold 9pm Festival Hub: City of Melbourne Festspielhaus (FREE)
SAT 7	9am Symposium: Wagner and Us	9pm Festival Hub: City of Melbourne Festspielhaus (FREE)
SUN 8	9:30am Symposium: Wagner and Us 10am Insight Talk 12 noon Laneway Lunch with Wagner	3pm Performance: Marschner's Der Vampyr 6:45pm Performance: Rienzi in Concert
MON 9	10:30am Ring Cycle Pre-Performance Talks	Cycle 3: Die Walküre
TUE 10		
WED 11	10:30am Ring Cycle Pre-Performance Talks	Cycle 3: Siegfried
THU 12	7pm Performance: Wagner in Paris	9pm Festival Hub: City of Melbourne Festspielhaus (FREE)
FRI 13	10:30am Ring Cycle Pre-Performance Talks 9pm Festival Hub: City of Melbourne Festspielhaus (FREE)	Cycle 3: Götterdämmerung

■ SPECIAL EVENTS
 ■ PERFORMANCES
 ■ CONVERSATIONS
 ■ FILM AND MEDIA

THE OPERAS

SYNOPSES

Wotan, ruler of the gods, visited the World Ash Tree, whose roots were fed by the spring of eternal knowledge and whose branches held together the universe: the upper realms of the gods; Riesenheim, home of the giants; the earth, with the Rhine and his daughters; and Nibelheim, a subterranean realm inhabited by the Nibelungs. Wotan drank from the spring, forfeiting an eye in return for wisdom. From the tree he tore a branch and shaped it into a spear. Weakened by the wound, the tree eventually withers and the waters of the spring dwindle and fail. On the shaft of his spear Wotan recorded the binding treaties by which he became ruler of the world.

Das Rheingold

In the depths of the Rhine, the three Rhinemaidens guard the Rhinegold, a treasure of immeasurable value. The Nibelung dwarf Alberich is dazzled first by the maidens and then by their treasure. Wellgunde reveals that whoever can forge the gold into a ring will gain mastery over the world. The required magic can be attained only by renouncing love. Alberich curses love vehemently and steals the gold.

Wotan, lord of the gods, dreams of eternal power and a fortress for the gods. He is reproached by his wife Fricka: he has promised to give Freia, keeper of the golden apples of eternal youth, to the giant brothers Fasolt and Fafner in return for their building the fortress. The giants demand their reward with Fafner proposing to abduct Freia by force. Loge, the god of fire, suggests an alternative payment: the mighty ring Alberich has forged from the Rhinegold. The giants agree to take Freia away as a provisional hostage until evening, and then hand her over in exchange for the gold. Wotan and Loge leave for the Nibelungs' underground home, Nibelheim, to take possession of the gold.

Here they meet Alberich's brother Mime, who has forged the Tarnhelm, a magic helmet that transforms its wearer into any shape. Alberich takes the helmet by force and uses his power to enslave the Nibelungs. Alberich appears and mocks the gods and dons the Tarnhelm to turn himself into a dragon, then into a toad, which the gods capture. Dragged to the surface, the dwarf is forced to summon the Nibelungs to heap up the gold. Wotan wrests the ring from his finger. Shattered, Alberich curses the ring: no one who possesses the ring will escape death.

The giants return and agree to accept the gold but Wotan refuses to part with the ring. Erda, goddess of the earth, appears and warns him that possession of it will bring about the end of the gods. Wotan reluctantly gives the ring to the giants and Freia is freed. The gods witness the first effects of the cursed ring as it claims its first victim – the killing of Fasolt by Fafner in the ensuing struggle over the treasure. The voices of the Rhinemaidens are heard, lamenting the loss of their gold as the gods walk toward their new home, Valhalla.

Die Walküre

ACT I

As a storm rages, Siegmund the Walsung, exhausted from pursuit by enemies in the forest, stumbles into a house for shelter. Sieglinde finds the stranger lying by the hearth, and the two feel an immediate attraction. But they are soon interrupted by Sieglinde's husband, Hunding, who asks the stranger who he is. Calling himself 'Woeful', Siegmund tells of a life filled with sorrow, only to learn that Hunding is a kinsman of his foes. Hunding challenges the stranger to combat the next day. Left alone, Siegmund calls on his father, Wälse, for the sword he once promised him. Sieglinde reappears, having given Hunding a sleeping potion. She tells of her wedding, at which a one-eyed stranger thrust into a tree a sword that thereafter resisted every effort to pull it out. Sieglinde confesses her unhappiness to Siegmund, whereupon he ardently embraces her and vows to free her from her forced marriage to Hunding. Siegmund compares their feeling to the marriage of love and spring. Sieglinde asks if his father was really 'Wolf', as he said earlier. When Siegmund gives his father's name as Wälse instead, Sieglinde knows for certain that he is the Walsung for whom the sword is intended. She tells him that he is her twin brother and Siegmund draws the sword from the tree.

ACT II

Wotan instructs his daughter Brünnhilde to protect Siegmund in the impending fight with Hunding. Brünnhilde warns Wotan that his wife, Fricka, the guardian of marriage, is approaching. Fricka arrives demanding the punishment of Siegmund and Sieglinde, who have committed adultery and incest. She knows that Wotan,

disguised as the mortal man Wälse, fathered Siegmund and Sieglinde. Wotan protests that he requires a free hero (i.e. one not ruled by him) to aid his plans, but Fricka retorts that Siegmund is not a free hero. He is a pawn in a game invented by Wotan, who is himself severely compromised by his promiscuity. Backed into a corner, Wotan agrees to forbid Brünnhilde to let Siegmund win the battle against Hunding, ensuring the death of his beloved child Siegmund.

Siegmund and Sieglinde enter. Sieglinde faints in guilt and exhaustion. Brünnhilde approaches Siegmund and tells him of his impending death. Siegmund refuses to follow Brünnhilde to Valhalla when she tells him Sieglinde cannot accompany him there. He draws his sword and threatens to kill both Sieglinde and himself. Impressed by his passion, Brünnhilde relents and agrees to grant victory to Siegmund instead of Hunding.

Hunding arrives and attacks Siegmund. Brünnhilde urges Siegmund to trust in his sword 'Nothung' but Wotan appears and shatters Nothung with his spear. While Siegmund is disarmed Hunding stabs him to death. Wotan looks down on Siegmund's body, grieving, while Brünnhilde gathers up the fragments of Nothung and flees with Sieglinde. Wotan strikes Hunding dead with a dismissive gesture, and angrily sets out in pursuit of his disobedient daughter.

ACT III

The Valkyries, preparing slain heroes destined for Valhalla, are surprised at the arrival of their sister, Brünnhilde, with Sieglinde. When they hear she is fleeing Wotan's wrath, they refuse to protect her. Brünnhilde tells Sieglinde that she bears Siegmund's child. She receives the pieces of the sword from Brünnhilde and thanks her rescuer as she rushes off into the forest to hide near Fafner's cave, a place safe from Wotan. When the god appears, he sentences Brünnhilde to become a mortal woman. Brünnhilde pleads that in disobeying his orders she was really doing what he wished. Wotan will not relent: she must lie in sleep, vulnerable to the first man who finds her. But as his anger abates she asks the favour of being surrounded in sleep by a wall of fire that only the bravest hero can penetrate. Wotan kisses Brünnhilde's eyes with sleep and mortality before summoning Loge, the spirit of fire, to encircle the rock.

Siegfried

ACT I

In his forest cave Mime, hammering at an anvil, complains of his hard existence, forging swords for Siegfried to smash. If only he could reforge Nothung then Siegfried could kill the dragon Fafner and win for Mime the ring and Nibelung treasure, but he knows he is unequal to the task of mending the sword. Siegfried enters presenting a bear, sending the terrified Mime behind the anvil. When Siegfried is given his latest sword, he immediately breaks it and berates its maker who attempts to calm the boy by reminding him how he brought up the lonely orphan. Siegfried forces from Mime the story of Sieglinde and of how she also entrusted Mime with the fragments of a shattered sword. Siegfried immediately commands him to reforge this sword and storms off into the forest. Alone, Mime disconsolately wonders how he is to achieve this when Wotan, in the guise of the Wanderer, enters and asks for hospitality. In return, the Wanderer offers his head in pledge - to be redeemed by answering three questions of Mime's. His answers to questions on the Nibelungs, giants and gods accurately describe the action of Das Rheingold. It is now Mime's turn to answer three questions of Wotan's choosing. These deal with Wotan's children, the Wälsungs (Siegmund and Sieglinde) and Siegmund's sword Nothung but Mime falters on the third question: who will reforge the sword? The Wanderer tells him it will be reforged by someone 'who has never known fear', and it is he to whom Mime's head is now forfeit. The Wanderer leaves. Siegfried returns and is exasperated to find the sword not ready. Mime explains it can only be mended by one who 'knows no fear' and goes on to describe this strange sensation to Siegfried, promising to lead him to Fafner's lair so as to learn it. Disgusted with Mime's incompetence Siegfried proceeds to reforge the sword himself. Mime is convinced Siegfried will succeed in slaying Fafner and conceives the idea of offering him a drugged potion after the combat so that he may kill Siegfried and gain the ring. Delighted with his work, Siegfried triumphantly splits the anvil in two with his new sword.

ACT II

Alberich is keeping watch outside Fafner's cave by night when the Wanderer enters. The Wanderer

assures him he is only there to witness events not to influence them. He also tells of a young hero being brought to that spot by Mime, in order to win the treasure. They wake the dragon and Alberich offers to deflect the attack in return for the ring but Fafner refuses. The stage empties as dawn breaks and Mime enters with Siegfried, leaving him in front of the cave. Siegfried becomes aware of the murmurs of the forest and especially of a forest bird singing in a tree overhead. He tries to converse with the bird with a reed pipe and then with his horn, the latter bringing forth the dragon. After a brief combat Siegfried kills him. Withdrawing his sword from the body he burns himself with the dragon's blood. In putting his fingers to his mouth, he immediately understands the voices of nature, especially that of the woodbird, who tells him of the ring and the treasure. He enters the cave and the two brothers, Alberich and Mime, immediately quarrel over the expected spoils but slip away when Siegfried reappears. He can now also understand Mime's real meaning behind his flattering words and comprehends his plot to kill him. Siegfried contemptuously strikes him dead and leaves in search of a bride, described by the woodbird, who lies asleep on a mountain top surrounded by fire.

ACT III

At the foot of a mountain Wotan calls up Erda, the Earth goddess, to arise from her sleep. He is consumed by the thought that the twilight of the gods is at hand and is determined to appoint Siegfried his heir: he shall awaken Brünnhilde who shall redeem the world. Erda sinks into the earth as Siegfried enters, following the woodbird. He confronts 'the Wanderer'. Pressing events to a climax, Wotan bars the way to Brünnhilde with his spear, which Siegfried shatters with his sword. Wotan disappears leaving Siegfried to continue his way. He plunges through the fire which dies down to reveal Brünnhilde asleep, as at the end of Die Walküre. Siegfried approaches and draws back in fear and wonder at this his first sight of a woman. He kisses Brünnhilde to wake her. Opening her eyes, Brünnhilde greets the sun and the hero who has freed her from her sleep. Their mutual happiness is clouded when Brünnhilde grieves for the loss of her godhead but she then submits to Siegfried as her master and happily consigns the gods to oblivion in the all-consuming exultation of their love.

Götterdämmerung

PROLOGUE

On the Valkyries' rock, three Norns spin the rope of Fate, recalling Wotan's days of power and predicting Valhalla's imminent fall. When the rope breaks they descend in terror to their mother, Erda, goddess of the earth. At dawn Siegfried and his bride, Brünnhilde, emerge from their cave. Though fearful that she may lose the hero, she sends him forth to deeds of valour. To remind her of his love, Siegfried gives Brünnhilde the magic ring of the Nibelung. Rapturously they bid farewell as Siegfried sets out down the Rhine.

ACT I

In their castle on the Rhine, Gunther, king of the Gibichungs, and his sister Gutrune, both unwed, ask counsel of their half brother, Hagen. Plotting to secure the ring, Hagen advises Gunther to consolidate his power by marrying Brünnhilde: by means of a magic potion Siegfried can be induced to forget his bride and win her for Gunther in return for Gutrune's hand. The hero's horn announces his approach. Gunther welcomes him, and Gutrune seals his fate by offering him the potion. Hailing Brünnhilde, he drinks and forgets all, quickly succumbing to Gutrune's beauty and agreeing to bring Brünnhilde to Gunther. After solemnising their bargain with an oath, the men depart. Hagen, keeping watch, gloats on the success of his plotting. On the Valkyries' rock, Brünnhilde greets her sister Waltraute, who says that Wotan has warned the gods their doom is sealed unless Brünnhilde yields the ring to the Rhinemaidens. When she refuses, Waltraute rides off in despair. Dusk falls as Siegfried reappears, disguised as Gunther; wresting the ring from the terrified Brünnhilde, he claims her as Gunther's bride.

ACT II

At night, before the Gibichung hall, the Nibelung Alberich forces the sleeping Hagen (his son) to swear he will regain the ring. Siegfried returns, as dawn breaks, with cheerful greetings for Hagen and Gutrune: he has won Brünnhilde for Gunther, who follows shortly. Hagen summons the vassals to welcome the king and his bride. When Gunther leads in Brünnhilde, she sees Siegfried and recoils; spying the ring on his finger, she decries his treachery and proclaims Siegfried her true husband. The hero, still under the potion's spell, vows upon Hagen's spear that he has never wronged her. Brünnhilde swears he lies, but

Siegfried dismisses her charge and leaves with Gutrune. The dazed Brünnhilde, bent on revenge, reveals to Hagen the hero's one vulnerable spot: a blade in the back will kill him. Taunted by Brünnhilde and lured by Hagen's description of the ring's power, Gunther joins the murder plot as Siegfried's wedding procession passes by.

ACT III

Near a mossy bank the three Rhinemaidens bewail their lost treasure. **Soon Siegfried approaches**, separated from his hunting party. The maidens plead for the ring, but he ignores both their entreaties and warnings. When the party arrives, Siegfried at Hagen's urging describes his boyhood with Mime, his slaying of the dragon Fafner and finally - after Hagen gives him a potion to restore his memory - his wooing of Brünnhilde. Pretending indignation, Hagen plunges a spear into the hero's back and stalks

off. Hailing Brünnhilde with his last breath, Siegfried dies.

At the Gibichung hall, Gutrune nervously awaits her bridegroom's return. Hagen tells her Siegfried has been killed by a wild boar, but when his body is carried in she accuses Gunther of murder. Hagen admits the crime. Quarrelling over the ring, Gunther is killed by Hagen, who falls back in fear when the dead Siegfried raises his hand. Brünnhilde, entering, orders a funeral pyre built for Siegfried. Musing on the gods' responsibility for his death, she takes the ring and promises it to the Rhinemaidens. Placing it on her finger, she throws a torch onto the pyre and throws herself into the flames. As the river overflows its banks and the Gibichung hall is consumed, the Rhinemaidens, dragging Hagen to a watery grave, regain their gold. Flames engulf Valhalla, leaving a human world redeemed by love.

The works of a skull-splitting Genius is evaluated at the *Wagner and Us Symposium* by using current politically correct concepts, especially the nonsense concept that label Wagner an 'antisemite' and 'racist'. The following articles are penned by individuals who participated in the four-day symposium held at The University of Melbourne.

Wagner's Ring Cycle works people up – but why?



Michael Halliwell

Associate Professor of Vocal Studies and Opera at University of Sydney, 26 November 2013



The Valkyries in Opera Australia's Ring Cycle aren't the only ones to feel emotional.

Opera Australia is currently performing Richard Wagner's most famous work, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* – [The Ring Cycle](#) – marking the bicentenary of the composer's birth, at

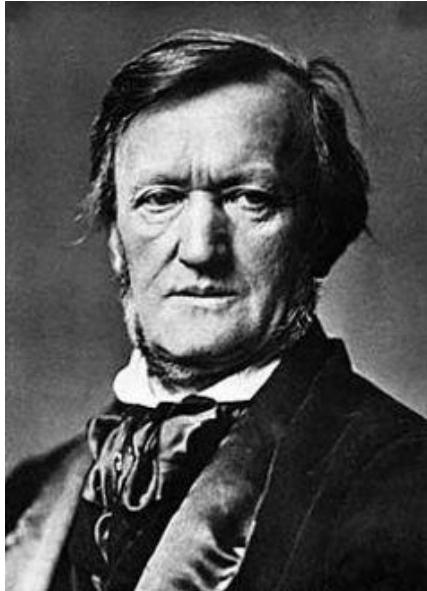
a [reported cost](#) of A\$20 million. If that brings out strong emotions in you, you're not alone.

From its first performance in 1876 in the German town of Bayreuth, *The Ring Cycle* has been controversial. Wagner is much more than a "mere" composer – he's a cultural phenomenon, as the [long list of events](#) associated with Opera Australia's sold-out run of *The Ring Cycle* demonstrates.

What is it about this enormous work that draws passionate reactions from both opera devotees and those who wouldn't be seen dead in an opera house?

Wagner's influence

Wagner himself has always cast a long shadow in the opera world. The German composer was born on May 22 1813, the same year as his Italian counterpart [Giuseppe Verdi](#) and 100 years before the British [Benjamin Britten](#) – and celebrations to mark the Wagner bicentenary are crowding out the other anniversaries.



Wagner in 1871. Wikimedia Commons

Wagner was a divisive figure virtually from the outset of his career and as a gifted if inconsistent writer of prose, was able to present his views, including a particularly virulent form of antisemitism, on a variety of topics with force, never skirting controversy. Extremely critical of the state of opera in Europe in the mid-19th century, he saw *The Ring* as pointing the way forward.

In this he succeeded as no opera composer has done before or since. He completed [13 operas](#) and we are still grappling with the ideas and artistic practice developed

within them. His influence, more than that of any other composer, is still very present in the opera world. Indeed, his influence extends into many aspects of European and world culture, not the least on an art form not invented in his day – cinema. Wagner's [concealed orchestra](#) at Bayreuth, the German town where *The Ring* was first staged, is an important precedent to the use of music in film.

How *The Ring* changed opera

The significance of *The Ring* lies both in its underlying theoretical frame and in the successful realisation of the ideas it embodies.

Wagner saw contemporary opera as decadent and dying, and, just as the "inventors" of opera did 250 years before, he went back to Greek drama for his inspiration.

The Ring itself is modelled on Greek tragedian Aeschylus' great tetralogy, [The Oresteia](#), with three main dramas, preceded by a prologue. There had been several reforming impulses in opera, but Wagner's innovations were the most comprehensive and influential.

The Ring changed the musical language of opera, effectively doing away with the musical structures such as [recitative, aria](#), duets and larger ensembles that had constituted the dramaturgy of the art form.

Wagner turned back to drama and developed music that could accommodate the complexities but retain the flexibility of dialogue between two or more characters. That staple of opera, the aria, disappears, as do larger ensembles where two or more characters sing simultaneously. There is virtually no chorus in *The Ring*.

Fundamental in the structure of *The Ring* was Wagner's evolution of what became known as [leitmotifs](#): recurring musical phrases that constitute a web of associations as the drama unfolds.



The Melbourne Ring Cycle, by Opera Australia.

Characters, emotional states, even ideas and a wide variety of other elements become associated with particular musical phrases, rhythms or harmonic progressions, thus creating a dense, constantly evolving, and fully enclosed dramatic world – the orchestra becomes the equivalent of the

novelistic omniscient narrator, but also functions as a form of character stream-of-consciousness.

The musical complexity of *The Ring* is staggering – particularly when one remembers its composition occurred over a period of more than 25 years, interrupted by

Wagner's writing first one of the longest operas in the repertoire, [Die Meistersinger of Nürnberg](#), and then [Tristan und Isolde](#), a work which begins to dissolve the whole tonal system developed in Western music over hundreds of years.

As with the great tragedies of Shakespeare, The Ring is timeless. It can be interpreted and staged in a multitude of ways, inevitably revealing fresh insights into the world of the drama itself – and also offering new perspectives on our contemporary world.

The Ring is now often presented as an environmentalist drama suffused with an anti-capitalism sentiment, reflecting Wagner's interest in Buddhism – he was contemplating an opera on the Buddha, but did not live to complete it.

Is The Ring worth doing?

Opera Australia evidently thinks so. Given its scale, The Ring is a hugely expensive undertaking for any opera company, but the significance of the work, whether one likes it or not, is undeniable.

For Opera Australia it will probably mean cuts in other areas, particularly in commissioning new work, which is regrettable – but the Wagner bicentenary is just too good an opportunity to miss.

Performances of the sold-out [Melbourne Ring Cycle](#) take place until December 13, 2013.

<http://theconversation.com/wagners-ring-cycle-works-people-up-but-why-19485>

The Melbourne Ring Cycle is a once in a century celebration



Kerry Murphy

Head of Musicology at University of Melbourne, 22 November 2013, 4.30pm AEST



Wagner has been inflaming people for a long time.

Even if you've not had the chance to see it, you'll know Melbourne is currently going to town over Wagner and [The Ring Cycle](#). There's a clear historic precedent for this – but we have to go back a whole century to find it.

In 1912, Englishman [Thomas Quinlan](#) visited Australia with his travelling opera company as part of an Empire circuit. His company promised to sing "in English to English speaking peoples all the time, never leaving the red portions of the geographical map".

Before departing Australia he posted a letter in major newspapers alerting readers that he would be back in 1913 and was willing to put on Wagner's Ring Cycle – "if 1,000 subscribers could be found to provide an advance subsidy".

Quinlan's production would mark the centenary of the German composer's birth. A century later, Opera Australia's [Melbourne Ring Cycle](#), directed by theatre veteran [Neil Armfield](#), is the centrepiece of this month's [Ring Festival](#) in Melbourne.

The full Ring Cycle was performed in [Adelaide in 1998](#) and [again in 2004](#), but it hasn't been performed in its entirety anywhere else in Australia since Quinlan's version.

Tickets for the current production sold out quickly – the [cheapest](#) going for A\$1,000 a pop – and the best seats in the house for A\$2,000.



Opera Australia's Melbourne Ring Cycle.

Because opera lovers can't elect to go along for just one night of Wagnerian excess – the Ring Cycle is made up of four operas:

[Das Rheingold,](#)
[Die Walküre,](#)
[Siegfried](#)
[Götterdämmerung](#)

– it's the whole cycle, or nothing. But this clearly hasn't been a deterrent.

Quinlan encountered similar enthusiasm to that evidenced by the forthcoming sell-out shows when he put his proposal to Melburnians more than a century ago.

He asked for [one guinea](#) each for dress circle tickets, less for stalls and gallery and no tickets issued except for the whole cycle. Quinlan made big claims about Wagner's four-opera cycle:

"The Ring, which is the supremest expression of music drama, and which should be of incalculable service to the advancement of Australian musical art has to be done on a scale of splendid completeness or not at all. It does not admit of mediocrity."

Quinlan obtained his subsidy easily and returned the following year with 475 tons of scenery and wardrobe, and 176 people.

The company, many of whom were recruited from Covent Garden, sang the operas in English and travelled with their own large orchestra. Members of the company knew each other well.

They were well rehearsed when they arrived and could thus set a truly punishing schedule as can be seen from the following list for Melbourne:

- * opening night on the Saturday was Wagner's [Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg](#)
- * Monday, Verdi's [Rigoletto](#)
- * Tuesday, Wagner's [Das Rheingold](#) (the first of the Ring operas)
- * Wednesday, Offenbach's [Tales of Hoffmann](#), matinée and Puccini's [Tosca](#) evening
- * Thursday, Saint-Saëns' [Samson and Delilah](#)

* Friday, Wagner's [Die Walküre](#) (the second installment in the Ring Cycle)

* Saturday, Gounod's [Faust](#)

* Sunday, free

* Monday, Wagner's [Siegfried](#) (the third of the Ring operas)

* Tuesday, Verdi's [Aida](#)

* Wednesday, Tales of Hoffmann matinée and Wagner's [Tannhäuser](#) evening

* Thursday Charpentier's [Louise](#)

* Friday, Wagner's [Götterdämmerung](#), the final opera in the Ring Cycle.

All up, the company performed 14 different operas in 14 days. Such a feat is unheard of today!

Although The Bulletin's critic maintained steady ironic criticism of the libretto of The Ring – writing that "a God incapable of sterilising a gnome's curse or stopping his wife's tongue is not much of a person to write a four-volume opera about" – the majority of the critics raved about the Ring claiming a new epoch in Australia's musical history.

Audiences flocked to the Ring Cycle, despite expensive tickets – they cost twice as much as those to the other operas in the season – and there was an overall sense of gratitude to Quinlan.

(Tickets to The Ring Cycle are still much more expensive than those for other operas. The priciest tickets for Opera Australia's production of Puccini's [La Bohème](#) in Sydney in January 2014 go for more than \$300 – but it's also possible to score a seat for \$70.)

Melbourne was greedy for more, and a petition was put to Quinlan to put on another Ring Cycle. He obliged and it was a weary troupe that then moved on to Sydney.

Quinlan's desire to perform in English had an evangelical edge to it. He was on a mission to introduce new audiences to opera and he stated confidently:

"I am quite certain that no other language will in future be acceptable to English-speaking audiences in any country that we have visited."



Opera Australia's Melbourne Ring Cycle.

Plans for further tours were stopped by the first world war, and The Ring was not staged in its entirety in Australia until 1998 when the State Opera of South Australia tackled it. Obviously antagonism towards Germany had an impact on performances of German opera in the periods after two world wars.

But opera programs after 1913 also showed a growing conservatism. Touring companies did not feel able to take risks, since the costs of box office failure were crippling. And when finally the first permanent opera company, the [Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust](http://theconversation.com/the-melbourne-ring-cycle-is-a-once-in-a-century-celebration-19519), as Opera Australia was first known, was established in Australia in mid 1956, risk taking was also not on the agenda.

Now 100 years later Melbourne audiences again have the opportunity to see the entire Ring Cycle in their home city. Sung in German this time, but as in 1913, with tickets far more expensive than those for any other opera – and sold out the day after the box office opened to the public.

Performances of the sold-out [Melbourne Ring Cycle](http://theconversation.com/the-melbourne-ring-cycle-is-a-once-in-a-century-celebration-19519) take place until December 13, 2013.

<http://theconversation.com/the-melbourne-ring-cycle-is-a-once-in-a-century-celebration-19519>

Explainer: Wagner's Ring Cycle, Der Ring des Nibelungen



Peter Tregear

Professor and Head of School of Music at Australian National University, 21 November 2013.



The Melbourne Ring Cycle is big, befitting the opera's stature.

It should come as no surprise in the nation that gave the world the Big Pineapple, the Big Guitar, the Big Sheep, and, for that matter, a [Big Ad](#), that the size of a cultural artefact in and of itself is enough to impress us.

Build something large enough, or do something often enough, and it stakes a claim on our attention. No immediate surprise, then, that Richard Wagner's Der Ring

des Nibelungen also fascinates Australians, including many who might not otherwise give opera a second thought. Extending over four nights, it consists of almost 16 hours of music written for immensely powerful voices singing over a colossal pit orchestra, and took about 26 years (from 1848 to 1874) to complete. If that is not a big enough list of

"bigs", the budget required to stage it is also of such a size that it can cripple even the most well-endowed opera company.

In the case of The Ring, however, size is most definitely not everything; there is more to our interest than that.



Terje Stensvold as Wotan Jacqueline Dark in The Melbourne Ring Cycle.

Wagner's professed aim, in fact, was not to be grandiose *per se*, but to equal what he considered to have been the highest achievement of human creativity – Greek tragedy. The Greeks, he believed, had developed a kind of communal art-as-therapy where the polis came together to celebrate and reflect upon what had sustained and nurtured them both as individuals and as a community.

Moreover, their theatre had also involved a successful combination of all the arts: poetry, drama, costume, dance, music, song.

Subsequently, however, this Greek drama had disintegrated, if not degenerated, into its various components, so that by Wagner's time (1813–1883) we had been left, as he saw it, with instrumental music without words, theatre without poetry, poetry without music, and so on.

This was no mere historical observation but was instead, he believed, a sign of a larger societal decay. For him, opera in particular had become little more than entertainment for the weary professional classes, a frivolous and vulgar manifestation of a world becoming inexorably estranged from itself.

His critique, which helps explain much of the plot of The Ring, preempts much of Karl Marx's theory of [alienation](#) (Entfremdung), which similarly asserted that we were becoming estranged from the products of our labour and from each other.

So that is what the fuss is about. But what is The Ring itself about?

Well, the convoluted plot is principally derived from a collection German mythical stories called the [Nibelungenlied](#), a sort of Northern European version of the [Iliad](#).



Warwick Fyfe as Alberich in The Melbourne Ring Cycle.

Like its Greek counterpart, it involves gods and mortals incestuously interacting with one another in the manner of one colossal dysfunctional family and,

taken out of context, the tale appears (like many opera plots before and since) to border on the ridiculous.

So too, however, do many of our classic myths, so we should not be concerned by this fact. The Ring is not meant to be realist drama, but rather a drama-as-allegory.

Its real dramatic content is not so much "out there" on stage as something found within in the minds of the characters, and in what is implied, what is alluded to, by their actions. Going to The Ring, then, is more like witnessing a collective dream, and like all dreams it demands, and rewards, interpretation (it is not for nothing that Wagner's music dramas are also particular beloved by psychoanalysts).

The Ring Cycle, summarised.

Our portal into this inner world of The Ring, and also what ultimately makes it so compelling, is Wagner's music. By doing away with the conventional structural forms of opera and composing instead a texture that he described as "[endless melody](#)", Wagner was able to create a complex and profoundly interconnected set of "leitmotifs" (sonic calling cards, if you like) that enable the orchestra not merely to reflect what is going on the stage action, but to become intimately fused with it, and indeed analyse it.

In effect The Ring ends up becoming one vast symphonic drama, with the orchestra as its most important character.

The broad details of the plot will be already familiar to those who have read (or seen) The Lord of the Rings Trilogy by J. R. R. Tolkien. Both works involve giants and dwarfs and such-like, and concern rings that corrupt the wearer while giving him or her mastery over the world.

Both, indeed, are also implied critiques of industrialised capitalist society. For those wanting to know more of the plot in finer detail, a great place to start is with two clever on-line resources; a two-and-a-half minute (yes, almost 400 times shorter than the actual Ring) plot summary (see video above) recently prepared by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, and the justly famous comic (but ultimately reverential) analysis by the English-Canadian singer and comedienne Anna Russell, below:

Performances of the sold-out [Melbourne Ring Cycle](#) take place until December 13, 2013.

<http://theconversation.com/explainer-wagners-ring-cycle-der-ring-des-nibelungen-20475>

Should we fund Wagner operas or statues of Kyle Sandilands?



Julian Meyrick

Professor of Strategic Arts at Flinders University, 18 November 2013, 7.22am AEST



The Melbourne Ring Cycle is expensive – but it may be worth it. Keith Saunders

The cultural dollar is tight. Why spend taxpayers' money on mounting Wagner operas rather than – say – erecting a mile-high statue of [Kyle Sandilands](#) on the moon warning alien civilisations what to expect should they approach further?

The list of things considered culture is endless. Once dance, drama, ballet and opera ruled the performing arts roost. But now, in an age of user-generated content and zombie walks, it's hard to defend opera's pre-eminence. Should we even try?



Zombie walks – not opera. Sheba_Also

Isn't everyone's taste equally valid? You like [Berlioz](#); I prefer boot-scooting. Why should one be thought better than the other, or attract public support to perpetuate its privileged status?

Wagner is expensive even by opera's standards, and the [Ring Cycle](#), which launches in Melbourne this evening, is expensive even by Wagnerian ones.

The production [reportedly](#) cost Opera Australia A\$20 million to stage.

It's pricey for audiences too – it costs [A\\$1000-2000](#) to attend four consecutive nights of The Ring Cycle). It's the sort of signature event that has opera buffs audibly panting and others muttering about the cost of it all.

To spend or not to spend?

The free market works, at least in theory, by striking a balance between the supply of something (s) and its demand (d). A good (x) is provided to consumers by producers, who vary in number depending on the level of profit that can be made.

Fixing the relationship between (s) and (d) is the index finger of Scottish philosopher [Adam Smith's](#) "invisible hand", the price mechanism (p).

Here is the source of all political objections to supply-side subsidy, be it for the car industry or for installation art: it queers (p), throwing out the delicate calibration between those who can provide a good and those willing to pay for it.

Adam Smith's "invisible hand" explained in 60 seconds./movie>

If people want to watch Wagner they should stump up for a ticket without relying on government help, and thereby distorting a self-regulating means of exchange. The real-life problems with this idealised model give experts in the dismal science much to ponder. Two are especially relevant for culture.

Public and private benefits

The first is the extent to which art generates public as well as private benefits. If watching Wagner operas can be shown to produce more creative citizens, increase national cohesion or improve public morals, there might be a case for more generally supporting it.

A considerable amount of research has been done in this area, as the 2004 Rand report, [Gifts of the Muse](#) details. Attending the Ring Cycle may suppress thoughts about Kyle Sandilands, for example – a public benefit many Australians would acknowledge.

Perfect knowledge

A second problem with the model is its assumption of "perfect knowledge". Consumers are supposed to acquire – it's never clear how or from where – an in-depth understanding not only of their own needs but the complex strategic goals of different producers.

Competition only works where there is the possibility of "substitution" – that is, of replacing one good with another of similar benefit in order to maximise personal satisfaction. Obviously this is much easier with goods that are homogenous and divisible (bread, bricks, toilet paper etc). The more singular (x) is, the more it resists substitution or – another way of saying the same thing – the more knowledge you need to substitute something for it.

In the real world people's preferences as revealed by the price mechanism are not a guarantee of good market outcomes because people:

- a) often don't know what they want
- b) haven't the wherewithal to find alternatives
- c) can't tell when they're being sold a crock.

Such "market failure" is the reason usually advanced for arts subsidy and unlike the private/public benefit argument it touches on culture's intrinsic qualities as a "merit good".

Societies need to educate their citizens to make informed cultural choices and provide cultural services which ensure the ongoing development of desirable norms and values.

Does 'one-off' art trump market failure?

Enter Wagner like a rampaging [Valkyrie](#). At a certain point a ground needs to be established for people to define themselves as choice-making beings, a pre-economic level of experience to assist cultural tastes to come into existence in the first place.

How can we judge the value of Wagner operas unless we have a chance to go to one every now and then? Our immediate needs are only part of the benefits equation.

Economists recognise "existence value", the price consumers will pay to ensure (x) continues to exist regardless of whether they use it or not; "option value", what they will pay to ensure they can use it; and "bequest value", the price they will pay so their children and children's children can use it.

The cultural experiences that shape us most deeply are the resolutely singular ones. You can quantify their benefits but not their value.

That doesn't mean they don't have one, only that it does not lend itself to aggregate numerical assessment.

The Ring Cycle is an example of "one-off" art. It does not supply an ongoing market need for long, gloomy operas

about Norse heroes. It provides an experience that helps define us as human beings so we can make meaningful

choices thereafter (including a few economic ones). Get to know Wagner first



Pietari Inkinen rehearses The Melbourne Ring Orchestra. Aidan Corrigan



The Melbourne Ring Orchestra rehearses. Aidan Corrigan

Every once in a while you have to take a chance with art if you want a life fully lived. It's expensive, yes, and there are no guarantees. You can certainly object to subsidising a particular staging of the Ring Cycle.

But you have to know a bit about Wagner first – his operas are potentially a transformative encounter.

The silent shadow of the price mechanism is opportunity cost – what we stand to lose if we do not buy (x). Many Opera Australia patrons this month will be seeing the Ring Cycle for the first time and for some it may indeed be a "[life-changing experience](#)".

In terms of supporting the production with public money, under what circumstances can we afford not to? *Performances of the sold-out [Melbourne Ring Cycle](#) take place from November 18 to December 13, 2013.*

<http://theconversation.com/should-we-fund-wagner-operas-or-statues-of-kyle-sandilands-19520>

Wagner dilemma:

Can we hate the bigotry but still love his music?

If we censor all racist, antisemitic, sexist or homophobic work then a whole slice of world culture is confined to the scrapheap



Richard Wagner's antisemitism overshadowed nearly all facets of his daily life.

Photograph: Stefano Bianchetti/Corbis

Leah Garrett, Wednesday 20 November 2013 12.24 EST

In 1992, the African-American film director John Singleton was among those who proposed DW Griffith's 1915 silent film [The Birth of A Nation](#) as a worthy candidate for restoration and preservation. His act [angered those who saw nothing worth preserving](#) in a race-baiting film that mocked black people and lauded the Ku Klux Klan as true American heroes. Singleton, however, argued that the film should be included precisely because it was so racist and defamatory – it would, he said, serve to remind future generations of their bigoted antecedents. An informed citizen must be aware of the racism embedded in such works so as to be able to produce an informed critique of them.

The operas of Richard Wagner continue to prompt the same type of questions about separating politics and ethics from art. Art, it is argued, exists in a world entirely separate from the artist who produced it. If we were to censor the works of all those who are racist, antisemitic, sexist, or homophobic then a whole slice of world culture would be confined to the scrapheap.

Two years ago, I wrote [a book about Wagner](#). Before I began, I knew the same random quotes about Wagner's antisemitism as everyone else and was aware of his essay [Das Judenthum in der Musik](#) which is filled with paranoid, antisemitic vitriol about the Jews and their music. But it wasn't until I read Wagner's diaries and letters that I realised his antisemitism overshadowed nearly all facets of his daily life and was undoubtedly one of his most serious obsessions.

Should this affect the way I listened to him? Long before Roland Barthes wrote [The Death of the Author](#), artists such as [James McNeill Whistler](#) were arguing that art should stand alone. The [New Critics](#) of the 1950s strongly endorsed this idea – insisting that art should be enjoyed without recourse to the historical or biographical context of the artist. Mostly southern white men from the Ivy Leagues, they argued

that art was a pure cultural product that should not be muddled by "politics".

Not everyone agreed with them. In the 1970s, African American, Native American, queer and feminist critics argued forcefully against their stance, pointing out that it is easy to insist upon the purity of art when you are part of a cultural elite unaware of the historical realities of racism, poverty or homophobia. The job of the audience is not to turn a blind eye to art's context, but to educate themselves about it.

I agree with them. Suggesting that one should enjoy art without thoughtful consideration of its context is asking the audience to turn off their intellect: don't think, just enjoy. It is an extremely condescending viewpoint, not least because the people advocating it tend to come from the privileged classes. What are they so afraid of? What is wrong with encouraging people to think critically? Why not discuss Wagner's rabid racism alongside his sublime music?

Those who argue art should be appreciated free of these complexities seem to think we can't hold two complex notions in our heads at the same time: art and artist. But I can sit in my office and listen [to the overture of Der Tannhäuser](#), moved to tears by its beauty, while also being keenly aware of the man who wrote it. We all can do this. We do this kind of thinking every day.

To ask that audiences deny this connection is to assume that only intellectuals and elites have the ability to understand the full complexities of art and how it is produced. I'm with John Singleton on this: let's enjoy the film or the book and the music and think hard about it at the same time.

Leah Garrett, Loti Smorgon research professor of contemporary Jewish thought and culture at Monash University will be appearing in the Ring Festival Debate: Art and Politics Cannot be Separated. The debate, organised by the Wheeler Centre, [will be at Melbourne](#)

[Town Hall on Sunday 24 November at 6.30pm.](#) Tickets \$12-\$20.
<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/nov/20/wagnerdilemmahatebigotrylovemusic?commentpage=1>

[See Wagner Symposium program in *Newsletter No 730*, and comment on program in *731-C*]

A to Z of Wagner: - continued from Newsletters Nos: 717, 723, 730

U is for Upbringing

Wagner was in every sense self-created, but confusion over his paternity continues to raise interesting questions

[Stephen Moss](#), Wednesday 20 November 2013 18.00 EST

U is for Upbringing, which in Wagner's case was messy. His father Carl Friedrich Wagner, a clerk in the Leipzig police service, died of typhus six months after the composer was born, and his mother, Johanna Rosine, immediately moved in with Ludwig Geyer, an artist and playwright who was a friend of Friedrich. When he was writing his autobiography, Wagner's step-sister Cäcilie gave him some letters which convinced him Geyer was his natural father, though the letters have been lost and there is no hard evidence for this. He also came to believe, erroneously, that Geyer was Jewish. Until the age of 14, took the name Geyer but then reverted to Wagner.



A figure of Richard Wagner by German artist Ottmar Hoerl in front of Bayreuth Opera House.

Photograph: Christof Stache/AFP/Getty Images

The confusion had artistic consequences, as Michael Tanner points out in his *Faber Pocket Guide to Wagner*. "Though Wagner's relations with his mother and his stepfather were invariably good," writes Tanner, "his operas are filled with characters whose paternity is unknown, who find it very difficult to ascertain anything about their early years, and who wonder about why they have the name they do."

From Geyer, Wagner absorbed a love of the theatre – the family moved to Dresden, where Geyer's theatre company was based. But in most respects he was self-taught and received only a rudimentary musical education as a child. Only in his teens did he start to receive proper instruction, and then mainly because he insisted on it. He was in every sense self-created, and the unorthodoxy and dogmatism which marked his career may be the result of the act of will which produced the dramatist-composer Richard Wagner.

V is for Valkyrie

Brünnhilde's eight warrior sisters, whose entrance is heralded by possibly the most famous piece of classical music ever.

V is for Valkyrie, which in Old Norse means "chooser of the slain". The valkyries' job was to carry off the heroes of the battlefield and take them to Valhalla, where they would have a high old time



The Valkyries in English National Opera's *Die Walküre*, 2004. Pic: Tristram Kenton for the Guardian

singing, drinking and remembering the old times.

Wagner relied on the Norse sagas, principally the [Volsunga Saga](#) and the [Poetic Edda](#), for the plot of *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie), the second and best-loved instalment of the Ring cycle – certainly it is the one most often given as a standalone [opera](#).

Brünnhilde and her eight valkyrie sisters are the daughters of chief god Wotan and the earth goddess Erda. They enjoy a sort of demigod status in return for their demanding job of ferrying round body parts, and Brünnhilde's willingness to relinquish her immortality to save Siegmund and then her

love for Siegfried are the crux of the cycle and the key to the creation myth it encapsulates.

[The Ride of the Valkyries](#), the stirring prelude to Act III of *Die Walküre*, is the most famous part of the Ring cycle, probably the most famous passage Wagner wrote, and possibly the most famous piece of [classical music ever](#) written. [It was used to powerful effect as an](#)

[accompaniment to an horrific helicopter attack on a Vietnamese village in *Apocalypse Now*](#).

Test: [learn the names of Brünnhilde's eight valkyrie sisters](#) to impress your friends and other Ring-goers. <http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/nov/28/a-to-z-of-wagner-v-is-for-valkyrie>

From Wikipedia –

Wagner's *Das Judentum in der Musik*

Recent reception^[edit]

'Das Judentum' was an embarrassment to the early Wagnerites and was rarely reprinted in the early 20th century, except as part of his collected works. Fischer has found no significant critical comment on the essay. Before the [Nazi](#) period there was just one reprint of the essay itself, in [Weimar](#) in 1914. It is therefore very unlikely that it was read by [Hitler](#) or any of the Nazi hierarchy during the development of the Nazi movement (or later) and there is no evidence of this. During the Nazi period there were just two publications: in [Berlin](#) in 1934 and in Leipzig in 1939. Neither of these seem to have been large editions.

'Das Judentum' is not quoted or mentioned by early writers on Nazism in the 1950s such as [Hannah Arendt](#). Interest in the work seems to have revived in the 1960s with new awareness of the [Holocaust](#) following the [Eichmann](#) trial. In this context some have suggested that Wagner's advice for Jews to 'go under' 'like Ahasuerus' was intended as a call for their extermination, as planned by the Nazi regime, but there is no justification for this. In fact the 'Ahasuerus' Wagner [may have had in mind](#) was a character from a play ('*Halle und Jerusalem*') by [Achim von Arnim](#), a 'good' Jew who voluntarily sacrifices himself saving other characters from a fire.^[25] Wagner may have meant no more than 'Jews must sacrifice their separate identity for the common good'; the interpretation that he intended murder was never attributed to him before the Nazi policy of physical extermination, **which remains conjecture without physical proof**.

Because the Nazis deliberately took 'ownership' of Wagner for their own propaganda purposes, it does not follow logically that one should interpret the composer's writings only in the context of Nazi policies. Wagner died six years before Hitler was born in 1889.

The essay was omitted from the 'complete' edition of Wagner's prose works issued in 1983 on the centenary of his death,^[26] because of its perceived link with Nazi antisemitism. A scholarly critical edition, with background material and contemporary comments, was prepared by Jens Malte Fischer in 2000.

Some writers (for example, [Bryan Magee](#)) have sought to make a qualified defence of Wagner's originality of thought

in 'Das Judentum', despite acknowledging its malevolence.^[27] However, a full consideration of 'Das Judentum's' contents^[28] weakens this argument. It is perhaps therefore inappropriate to bring forward 'Das Judentum' in itself as a major milestone in German antisemitism; although Wagner's attitude to the Jews in general was highly equivocal. His later writings, published when he was a well-known and influential figure, frequently contain aggressive anti-Jewish comments, although at the same time he maintained a circle of Jewish-born colleagues and admirers.

Adolf Hitler presented himself as an admirer of Wagner's music, and is said to have claimed that "there is only one legitimate predecessor to National Socialism: Wagner". Wagner's music was frequently played during Nazi rallies (as was the music of Beethoven, also 'appropriated' by the Nazis).^[29] Wagner's daughter-in-law, [Winifred Wagner](#), (who never met the composer), was an admirer of Adolf Hitler^[30] and ran the [Bayreuth Festival](#) of Wagner's music from the death of her husband, [Siegfried](#), in 1930 until the end of [World War II](#), when she was ousted. During the Nazi regime, the Nazi hierarchy was frequently required to attend performances of Wagner operas (although they did not necessarily respond enthusiastically).^[31] Thus Germans of the Nazi era, even if they knew nothing about music and nothing of Wagner's writings, were presented with a clear image of the anti-Jewish Wagner as a great German.

Because of these factors, performances of Wagner's works in the modern state of [Israel](#) did not occur during the twentieth century, by consensus. In recent years many Israelis have argued that it is possible to appreciate his musical talents, without implying acceptance of his political or social beliefs. A public performance in [Tel Aviv](#) in 2001 of Wagner's prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, conducted as an unprogrammed encore by [Daniel Barenboim](#), left its audience partly delighted, partly enraged.

References

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Das_Judentum_in_der_Musik#Recent_reception

First Reviews

State Theatre, Arts Centre Melbourne

***Das Rheingold* – 18 November 2012**

Feathers and speedos in the first part of Neil Armfield's Wagnerian vision gets this

Ring off to a great start - By [Alan John](#) on November 19, 2013

One of those rare, electrically charged pin-drop silences preceded the

One of those rare, electrically charged pin-drop silences preceded the opening bars of the new Inkinen-Armfield *Ring* cycle for Opera Australia at the Arts Centre in Melbourne last night. Then the low E flat almost imperceptibly reached our ears and the curtain rose to those velvety brass textures that enfold you like a womb revealing what? An image of the slowly rotating earth achieved through projection? No, it's a sea of densely packed human bodies on a revolving stage reflected in a vast suspended mirror. Like a Spencer Tunick photograph. But hang on, they're not naked, they are in bathing suits and it's starting to look for all the world like a horizontal version of Charles Meere's Australian Beach Pattern, that idyll of classless carefree humanity united by their love of sun and water and natural beauty that is part of every Australian's view of what they are (or were). As the famous drone gathers momentum so does the crowd; surging and developing its own internal energy through subtle choreography (the first example of what is to be a crucial feature of this production: outstanding choric movement work by associate director Kate Champion).

By the time the white water starts to foam in the strings the crowd rises and parts for three leggy Tivoli showgirls in scanty aquamarine (Lorina Gore, Jane Ede and Dominica Mathews as vocally and physically gorgeous Rhinemaidens). We're only five minutes in and I'm starting to wonder how all this Aussie iconography is going to sit with such an elemental and quintessentially European epic. Three hours of continuously unfolding music drama later (is there a more remarkable feat of single-minded through-composition in history?) the answer is: surprisingly well. And I can still assert that after taking in the jaw-droppingly beautiful and outrageous finale dominated by 30 odd of the Rhinemaidens' airy cousins; feather fan dancers in literally all the colours of the rainbow.

I'm sure many international critics will cite Baz Luhrmann or dub this the *Priscilla Ring* but if they do, they are missing the point. This is not some irreverent kitsched-up classic for the sake of it. Director Neil Armfield's signature mix of the everyday and the universal, of the playful and the profound, is at work here. It is a principle at the heart of the work of designer Robert Cousins (who worked on the same director's *Cloudstreet*) and Costume designer Alice Babidge too. Not that there's any shortage of Australian references here. Shonky property developers Fasolt and Fafner in their sunnies and pink ties are all too reminiscent of the characters that people the front pages of Sydney newspapers; there's a touch of the pratfalling old vaudevillian George Wallace in Graeme Macfarlane's hapless Mime (superbly sung, too; refreshingly free of the whiney mannerisms that traditionally define this role), and it's hard for an Australian audience not to see a certain larger than life public figure in Alberich's incarnation as self-made and self-taught mining magnate. There's even our most celebrated extinct species (surely the first of many to come), the Tassie tiger, in a glass case as a reminder that us Aussie nature lovers are not averse to treating her rough if there's a buck to be made. But such details are far from the sum total of the vision of this *Rheingold* (and, I'm presuming, of this whole tetralogy).

Yes, the natural world is dazzling. The "show" it puts on for us provokes a child-like response: when the gold in its natural state is revealed – a sea of hand held tinsel – it's as if all our Christmases have come at once. But this gold breathes and bubbles and innocently revels in its own beauty. It teems with chaotic, uncontrollable life as opposed to its value-added, post Nibelheim version in Scene 4: stylish, tasteful and sterile ingots (actually gold iPhone boxes!) piled up like a fetishistic display of must-have status toys in a Dubai duty free. In the hands of this creative team, it's crystal clear what Wagner's massive rambling poem is all about.

It's a vision of the fall of mankind. Indiscriminate exploitation and violation of natural resources in deadly combination with the renunciation of empathy and cooperation (the triumph of self-love) will lead to corruption, contempt for life and ultimately catastrophe: in the James Lovelock scenario, the revenge of Gaia.

Alberich's original sin – the theft of the Rhine's gold – is here symbolized by the haunting and nightmarish image of him abducting a terrified little girl from the beach and the theme of defilement of innocence is directly carried through to the next scene where we witness the consequences of Wotan's casual pact with the giants to effectively use sexual favours with his youngest sister to pay for his new mansion. Rape is always just around the corner in this world and the only thing standing in the way of free-for-all pillage is the blokey rules of fair dealing engraved in runes on Wotan's spear (here more like Prospero's staff).

In the penultimate scene, Armfield's melding of deep metaphor and human-scale drama is at it's startling best when Wotan, having just used the peacemaker's staff to hobble Alberich's shins, unceremoniously throws it on the ground in order to give himself two hands to wrest the ring of power from the dwarf's finger in an act of crude and naked brutality. Alberich then picks it up to deliver his parting rewrite of the rulebook: in the new world order, there will be nothing but endless terror of loss by the strong and boundless lust for gain by the weak. Sounds like a recipe for the next cataclysmic GFC.

Our new *Ring* then, is rich in ideas but no less so in vocal prowess and characterisation. At its centre is the wonderful Wotan of Norwegian baritone Terje Stensvold. His glorious singing promises much for the coming operas but so too does his commanding, complex presence. From his first brooding entry, in Wagner's velvet gown, as a troubled soul already dreaming of his own demise, to his exit as towering megalomaniac, leading the elite into their ivory tower, he is magnetic on stage.

So too is his nemesis, Deborah Humble as Erda the earth goddess in her one brief yet unforgettable scene of warning (or is it threat?). Hers is a magnificent wine dark mezzo that can effortlessly hold its own with huge orchestral forces even in its lowest register.

Richard Berkeley-Steele's lends his Loge a penetrating and true tenor with impeccable diction. His physical energy and expressive eyes are helped along by Babbage's superb platinum zoot suit and skivvy to give a Weimar-like cynicism to this slippery character: as much a backstabber as a yes man.

Where to stop? Jacqueline Dark's Fricka, Daniel Sumegi's Fasolt, Andrew Moran's Donner; the cast is uniformly very

strong. But, let's face it, it is Warwick Fyfe's show. Shambling on as the anoraked fat boy from school, hopelessly in lust with the showgirls who prick-tease him then mercilessly mock him, he grows in vocal stature as the scene progresses until we are in no doubt that this nerd's revenge will be terrifying and vast. The loopy, all-powerful, psychopathic lord of the Nibelungs that he gives us in scene 3 and its chilling, down-but-far-from-out flipside in scene 4 are among the great characterisations of the Australian operatic stage and the powerful, multi-coloured, if at times wild voice is a dominating force in the production. What of the musical direction by Finnish wunderkind Pietari Inkinen? (Do they have some kind of special wunderkind school up there?). There's no question he was up to the herculean task of finding and sustaining the single trajectory of the composer's great arc. The longest symphonic movement in history. The apotheosis of the Transition. From my seat, the words intelligent and restrained came to mind. The performance was impeccably balanced in favour of the text, as it should be, but I look forward to more moments when the obviously fine Melbourne Ring Orchestra is let off its leash. Musical highlights for me were the huge statement of the "woe"

motif as Alberich dismisses his herd of workers in Scene 4 and the strange and lovely lifting of the mist sequence on Freia's return, in which a genuinely beautiful string tone was achieved. Cousins' set and Damien Cooper's lighting design also deserve special mention. I don't wish to spoil the magical surprise of the transformation to scene 2 but the simultaneously beautiful and grotesque Victoriana, combined with a replica (soon to be rudely defaced) of one of the original Bayreuth backdrops perfectly capture the anal and life-denying side of Wotan's split persona. Cooper is at his best in the stark swordlike slashes of silver and gold that characterise Scene 4, and for the stunning final tableaux.

Off to a great start is an understatement.

Opera Australia Rhinegold

Clip 1:<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iX6ssIOABmM>

Clip 3:<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siwuZxtL3D8>

Clip8:<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35dSanGbMdI>

Clip 11:<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXufs9die4c>
[http://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/Article/364781,ive-review-with-video-das-rheingold-opera-australia.aspx](http://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/Article/364781,live-review-with-video-das-rheingold-opera-australia.aspx)

***Die Walküre* – 20 November 2013**

Another night of wonders and the best is saved 'til last, but more of that later

By [Alan John](#) on November 21, 2013

Die Walküre, with less plot to get through than has *Rheingold*, takes its time and leaves more of the emotional and psychological work to the orchestra. Pleasingly to say, now the Melbourne Ring Orchestra under Pietari Inkinen comes into its own and takes wing. There are rich contributions from the cello and woodwinds in Act 1, shattering and noble work from the brass in Acts 2 and 3 and delicate and lithe filigree from the violins and harps in the Magic Fire.

Inkinen handles the pacing very well, especially the slow-burning fuse of the first act. When the orchestral fireworks go off – at the point where the magic sword is seized and its aftermath, or in the stunning few pages of white hot composition that follow Brünnhilde's decision to defy her father – the effect is spine-tingling.

And, of course, the wonders of performance are not confined to the pit. In the title role, Susan Bullock brings to mind, amongst other attributes, an adjective I never thought I'd use to describe a Brünnhilde: loveable. This is no humourless battleaxe stepped off the pages of some Warhammer magazine. Her first appearance as a spunky, butch little female Peter Pan, hollering her lungs out for the fun of it, makes it clear why she's her daddy's favourite. She embodies the spirit of her mother the Earth, the Rhinegold spirit of the uncontrollable life force, who is a breath of fresh air amid all the dreary "War Father" and "Lord of the Slain" fascistic rhetoric. She's smart as a tack, too, like the annoying child who answers back once too often, but, even more annoyingly, is always right.

Bullock's vocal stamina and force in the upper register is pretty staggering, but how beautifully she shapes her melodic material and what a fine sense of line she has. Clearly one of the great Brünnhildes of recent times.

Superb too are the Walsungs – Sieglinde and Siegmund. Miriam Gordon-Stewart has a honeyed warmth to her soprano that can make you melt (as in Act 1's "Du bist der Lenz"). What's remarkable is that the same quality is somehow still present

when she pins your ears to the back wall! (Her rendition of the marvellous appearance of the tetralogy's final redemptive melody is that powerful.)

Stuart Skelton is likewise no slouch at grabbing your attention (witness the two massive sustained notes of his "Walse! Walse!"), but he can be heartbreakingly tender as well (as in his valedictory words to Sieglinde in Act 2). After hearing his magnificent Peter Grimes a few years ago, I was greatly looking forward to this performance, and it exceeded expectations. I know we're global citizens now but I found myself feeling stupidly proud to belong to a country that produced operatic performers of the calibre of this pair.

Terje Stensvold's Wotan continues to impress. He's brave, too: the start of his Act 2 monologue (for which Wagner requests "a low muffled voice") was dangerously close to being undersung, but even his softest tone has fire in it and he crowns the night with a stirring and heartfelt farewell.

Jacqueline Dark's Fricka is even more formidable here than she was in *Rheingold*. Looking like some hard-nosed bitch from the Teaparty in her dress, replete with draped dead animal, she rose to scarily passionate heights in her big harangue ("So ist es denn aus mit den ewigen Göttern"). Jud Arthur's menacing redneck Hunding is also wonderfully sung.

And what about those Valkyries! Perilously descending from the heavens in their combat greens (a brilliant conceit from costume designer Alice Babidge) like some crack all-female SAS squadron, they make a thrilling and, at times, terrifying noise. Talk about Girl Power! Here's an auteur that's been dead for one hundred and thirty years putting contemporary Hollywood to shame with his appreciation of what all that strong female energy can unleash.

Come to think of it, the feminist politics of the opera are extremely well brought out in this production. Good on Sieglinde for eloping with her brother and getting the hell out of that claustrophobic and depressing world of men and their po-faced treaties that usually involve the rape, abduction and

subjugation of women. That Wotan can later wish such a fate upon his own daughter is made doubly shocking in the light of his engineering of this joyous liberation.

Thematically there is strong continuity in director Armfield and designer Cousins' vision of the cycle. Love and Spring (Sieglinde and Siegmund) are brother and sister. But it's as if the natural forces of joyous sex and rebirth are illegal in the world that Alberich created and Wotan perpetuated. The cold and forbidding log cabin (shades of the old hillbilly thriller *Deliverance* here) is gorgeously blanketed in soft green for the "Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemund" sequence, but as we return for Act 2 it has been replaced by a colder and more gargantuan steel spiral staircase wrapping itself around Wotan's now even more extensive collection of stuffed and presumably extinct animals. It's the kind of display that one could well imagine as the centrepiece of some (air-conditioned of course) global conglomerate's HQ 100 years from now.

Walking and talking on the boardroom steps, Fricka now sides with the life-deniers while Wotan, hoisted on the petard of his own laws, is unable to go through with his secret plans for regeneration.

To be honest, I felt the energy flagged in this difficult act and the set contributed to a slight awkwardness in the staging of the final fight and its consequences. But these are minor hitches in what is a fine production.

So what's the most wonderful of the wonders? No, it's not a stage effect (although the opera ends with a suitably radiant *coup de theatre*). It's the moment after Wotan kisses away his most beloved daughter's immortality and then leads her by the hand, as you would a frightened little child, to where she must lie; gently calms her fear and, a caring father again, lies with her until she is asleep. Inkinen achieves an achingly hushed yet extremely expressive tone from the orchestra that perfectly accompanies the action. I've never heard this music sound so exquisitely sad and, somehow, wise.

When it comes to Wagner, I've always tried hard to judge the work not the man. In spite of this, the knowledge of what an unpleasant individual he was has led me to be suspicious of his emotion as pompous, overblown and hollow; or worse still that there is something vicious lurking behind it. In this one theatrical moment, Armfield and Inkinen work hand-in-hand to reveal, in the midst of this vast epic, a simple honest humanity as moving as anything I've experienced, even on Neil's favourite intimate stage at Belvoir Street in Sydney.

I can only hope there will be more such wonders to come.

Clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfDLmzEMXsU>

<http://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/Article/365081,Live-review-with-video-die-walk252reoperaaustralia.aspx>

***Siegfried* - November 22, 2013**

Armfield and Vinke find the Mensch in the Übermensch - By [Alan John](#) on November 23, 2013

You need a singer with almost super-human skill to bring off the title role in *Siegfried*. Wagner demands over four hours of singing time, much of that involving having to soar over heavy orchestration, and then throws into the job description the ability to convincingly melt, mould and temper steel, hammer in rhythm with semiquaver accuracy, walk through fire, oh yes and slay a dragon along the way. Trouble is the operatic super heroes who fit the bill are usually unsuited to the task of making Wagner's 'Übermensch' anything other than an unappealing bore who's somewhat scary to be around for any length of time.

The miracle of this production is that Stefan Vinke, a tenor in a million whose voice indefatigably glows and cuts as powerfully and as dependably as his character's mighty sword, manages under Neil Armfield's direction to let a beautiful, if damaged, soul to shine through the heroics. I never imagined it possible to see a Siegfried that I felt for, laughed with and inwardly cheered on.

Not that it's always thus. As the cuckoo in Mime's seedy little nest he is a petulant, oversized adolescent, totally lacking in frontal lobe inhibitions. (Throughout the opera he is incapable of deception, blurting out his feelings the moment he experiences them and in this *Ring*, we see him clearly as the emotional counterside to Brünnhilde's impulsive wise child.) But the hand drawn kiddie pics of dragons and monsters that adorn the wall next to his bunk bed are a poignant reminder that this child-man was a boy reared (or rather groomed for a sinister purpose) by a creep in some kind of loveless, dingy granny flat with more than a hint of the crystal meth lab about it.

Graeme Macfarlane gives us more of the great clown that he's developed with the character of Siegfried's unlikely "dad". The lack of the conventional nasality in his delivery (and, perish the thought, any hint of the ghastly anti-Semitic overtones encouraged by Wagner) breathes new life and comedy into the

first Act. Fussing around the microwave with his instant powdered stew (how Siegfried managed to bulk up on this diet of share house bloke food is anyone's guess: raw bear meat perhaps?) he comes across as that no-hoper, wily but slightly thick uncle that never married. Macfarlane tires a little towards the end of act 2 and he comes off second best with the orchestra in the fabulous passage where he tries to spook the boy who knows no fear, but his is a major contribution to the success of the evening.

I found Robert Cousins' decision to frame the Act 1 action within a large Picture Palace proscenium arch (with a few recalcitrant random chaser lights on opening night) enigmatic at first, but its purpose and utility gradually reveal themselves: we are essentially watching a drama written and directed by Wotan. He's even cast himself as one of the human leads, the Wanderer, who turns up on Mime's doorstep with his ageing hippy hair, Big Lebowski shades and prodigious tanned bare chest (so that's where Terje Stensvold's mighty baritone comes from!).

He has left his wife and the family mansion and gone feral. Clearly chronically depressed, he harbours a death wish so deep that he's written himself out of the script by early in Act 3, and yet he's become curiously Zen about it all. Particularly striking was the moment in Act 2 where he advises Alberich to chill out and go with the flow ("Alles ist nach seiner Art"), set so aptly to the Rhine motif. The mindset of the greedy industrialist, blind to the parlous state of the plundered and befouled earth, causes him to miss Wotan's hidden meaning: only once all the power and the glory of our race is destroyed can nature start to heal itself and the river of life flow freely again. Talk about Deep Green, this mantra is almost black!

A less depressing kind of black infuses the Wanderer's newfound dry sense of humour. Still richly sung, Stensvold's winning characterisation of the "three questions" game with

Mime – so often a draggy recapitulatory chore – was here extremely entertaining. A moving scene with the now almost decrepit Erda (the wonderful Deborah Humble singing behind a wheelchair-bound actor and mime) and an exhilarating version of his final Freudian encounter with the son destined to smash his staff, bring this mighty performance to a close and make you wish Wagner had found room for Wotan in the final opera.

I don't think it's too big a spoiler to say that if you want to see a dragon, spend \$15 this Christmas on *The Hobbit*. What you *will* get in Armfield's staging of the ink-black Act 2 prelude is a terrifying spectacle of a different kind. Jud Arthur as lonely psychopath/Phantom of the Palladium Fafner sits in his dressing room applying his Halloween makeup. But the mirror is also a camera and his monstrous visage is projected on to the cyclorama (defaced by the gash Siegfried inflicted on it at the fever-pitched end of Act 1), with dizzying effect, especially as the stage begins to revolve. This was such a breathtaking device that I felt a bit short-changed when it failed to return for the battle, although the trade off is equally rewarding: Arthur's tragic and affecting death scene is as elementally human as you can get. Noble in song, the Lord of the Ring is reduced to something from a human butcher shop; stark naked and dripping torrents of blood.

Cue Taryn Fiebig's cheeky and beautiful, silver-voiced Woodbird and the seemingly endless stream of glorious music that is Act 3. What a feast Pietari Inkinen sets before us in his shaping of this technicolour score. I used to subscribe to the commonly held view that Wagner was running out of steam by the end of Act 2 and that, having pushed out two extraordinary masterworks (*Tristan* and *Mastersingers*) in the interim, returns to complete the opera with new maturity and technique. Of course the Act 3 prelude is a dazzling new start, but I was struck by how much of *Die Meistersinger's* music is prefigured in Act 1.

Marvels of melodic invention and originality of orchestration abound in *Siegfried* and, some moments of wonky brass intonation aside, the Melbourne *Ring* Orchestra are at the top of their game here. Inkinen is willing to drive them hard too and, even if sometimes the singers failed to entirely keep up (there were a few sloppy ensemble issues in the first two acts), occasional inaccuracies are a small price to pay for the joy of musical direction that sees the drama as paramount.

It's quite a wait, but how great it is when Brünnhilde is finally thrown into the male dominated mix of the opera. Susan Bullock arrives, controversially, as if cryogenically preserved from the previous night in a plastic wrapped packing case! Another one of the unreconstructed Wotan's extinct animal trophies? Her awakening shimmered both vocally and orchestrally and a great depth of warmth and surprising delicacy characterised her part in the love duet. No elephantine bellowing here. What came through in the singing and the direction was a touching vulnerability in both these larger than life figures: Siegfried's journey is away from innocence, discovering his weaknesses along the way, towards the love that is latent in him. Brünnhilde's complementary path leads away from wisdom, also finding the meaning of fear before arriving, too, at good old-fashioned love.

The curtain closes on the pair pashing madly like the two teenage virgins that they are. It's a fitting and joyous close to the most human version of this epic you're ever likely to see.

Clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfDLmzEMxsU>

<http://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/Article/365306.live-review-siegfried-opera-australias-melbourne-ring.aspx>

Götterdämmerung – 25 November 2013

A stunning, if far from fairytale, ending to OA's Ring - By [Alan John](#) on November 26, 2013

As originally conceived, Wagner's foray into the world of Teutonic myth was to be confined to a single opera, *Siegfried's Death* that roughly traversed the scenario of what we now know as *Götterdämmerung*. How peculiar and unsatisfying a piece that would have been. It's a truism to say that the composer and musical polemicist effectively dropped his bundle in the final installment of the cycle, at least when it came to his theories on how the music-drama of the future must behave.

It doesn't especially worry me that he resorts back to all the old Meyerbeerian conventions (trios, 'oath duets', spectacular choral set-pieces and the like) that he had publically ridiculed. What's more disappointing is the diminishing of the level of allegory (deep enough to allow one to insert an interpretation of choice, be it Marxist, Nietzschean, Jungian, Freudian or, in this production, Ecological) that has been so persuasively sustained up to this point. It gets tangled and temporarily submerged in the operatically stock and almost petty web of betrayal and revenge plotting that seems to occupy the bulk of the evening.

Of course there's a huge amount to enjoy nevertheless. The production begins strongly with the Norns (Elizabeth Campbell, Jacqueline Dark and Anke Höppner) weaving their tapestry of the world (here another Bayreuth backdrop). I found that their three very distinct but equally regal voices gave great intensity

to their riveting tales of past present and future woe. Superb sounds from the strings in the dawn sequence and from the orchestra as a whole in the *Rhine Journey* followed (although the blazing horn section must claim the hero's laurel). In the latter, the river of humanity from *Das Rheingold* returned in a similar display of uncomplicated joy, Kate Champion's choreography bringing to mind that of New York's Mark Morris. Perhaps the memory of the start of the cycle was too distant, but, as beautiful as was the mass display of oarsmanship, I wasn't entirely convinced by this transition.

The scene in the Gibichung Hall of nouveau-riche splendor, with the king and his royal sister half-heartedly working out on gym treadmills against a wall full of old masters, managed to be funny and chilling at the same time. Sharon Prero's blonde bimbo Gutrune is a terrific creation. Awash with feigned maidenly blushes when the beefcake man of her dreams goes the grope before he's even been formally introduced, she still manages to throw herself at him with similar abandon (the sashes of her extensive collection of skimpy silk night gowns always seeming to come adrift at opportune moments) during their brief but torrid engagement. If her soprano is a touch too small at times it has a vibrant colour that she uses to fine effect; even movingly so in Act 3.

Barry Ryan's ringing-toned Gunther likewise makes us feel for this unfortunate fool/king who can't seem to put a foot right. But it's to Daniel Sumegi's Hagen that you are unwaveringly drawn. Handsome, even dapper in his naval officer attire, he is cold as ice and, as we soon glean, wracked by inner conflict: his sense of entitled superiority over his half brother (whose blood is weak but 'unstained' by Nibelung heritage) wavers between arrogant conviction and self-loathing infused doubt. Surpassing his excellent Fasolt, Sumegi's characterization is detailed and free of cliché, while his gigantic dark bass baritone never flags, almost seeming to function at times as the leader of the orchestra's brass section.

For me, probably the most memorable scene in the opera, aside from the spectacular finale, was the nightmarish encounter between Hagen and his wretched father, now so eaten away by his greed and envy that he has become some kind of distillation of evil, shuffling across the stage like Max Schreck's Nosferatu to feed his son's hate-filled resolve with poison. (How central to this production is Warwick Fyfe's remarkable Alberich! In musical and dramatic terms, it's a towering achievement.) As the vision fades we see Hagen in his half sleep point a gun first at his departing father, then at his own head in a powerful reminder that the curse of the ring corrupts those that covet it as much as those that possess it.

At the sound of Sumegi's mighty summons the good burghers of the Rhineland appear from all corners of the theatre, many in their tuxedos looking like they've literally stumbled from the ranks of the audience (although, armed to the teeth with hand guns as they are, perhaps an audience in Bogota rather than Melbourne). The gentlemen of the OA chorus, finally getting a chance to sing, let fly in splendid form and as they raise the roof Robert Cousins' multi-purpose barn-like frame, now encased in white wedding-marquee plastic, revolves to reveal a sumptuously catered piss-elegant setting for a hundred or so guests.

Brünnhilde, a magnificent steed turned hobbled nag, squeezed into her crippling gown, *hating* her stilettos, at first seems a cowed figure but she soon unleashes a terrifying rage, upending the wedding cake table in Incredible Hulk style. Guttrune in her frou-frou frock and her six bridesmaids in watermelon pink (Babidge's costumes are especially brilliant here) can only look on in horror as her day of days crumbles into anarchy.

Susan Bullock is extraordinary here, almost animalistically guttural at the peak of her despair, straddling a plastic rented chair in a most un-bridelike manner as befits the wild horsewoman that she is.

The first scene of Act 3 contains the *Ring's* least interesting music, sometimes sounding like a string of rehashed leitmotifs tacked loosely together, or, in the Rhinemaiden scene, almost

like Lehár. The staging here has a tawdry quality to it as the bored showgirls pace their dressing room in smudged eye-liner and head stockings before nearly succeeding in their efforts to seduce the randy and empty-headed Siegfried, still hung over from his own wedding reception.

From the hero's dying reprise of the awakening music (magnificently sung by the once again outstanding Stefan Vinke) through to the opera's close, however is a sustained feat of inspired composition that more than redeems the score, even if in Armfield's vision there is little offered in the way of *human* redemption.

Bullock delivered the finest *Immolation Scene* I've ever heard. Looking radiantly beautiful in her stripped down and slightly soiled wedding dress she made us witness the coming together of all her incarnations; dazzling and eager larrikin, shy but ardent lover, demonic shrew and now calm and resigned martyr. The quiet simple lyricism that she achieved in her forgiving farewell to Wotan ("Alles! Alles! Alles weiss ich") was utterly transporting and as she rose to the opera's penultimate heights it was as if she was going to literally take wing.

As Cousins' vast barn alarmingly bursts into real flames she and Siegfried, surrounded by floral tributes reminiscent of those piled high at Princess Diana's funeral, stand frozen like scarecrows or Guy Fawkes dummies at its centre. This then is the way the world ends. Even its potential saviors can do nothing to fend off this bonfire of the vanities, or to prevent the climate-change deniers from squabbling over who is going to be lord of the ashes. The sight of Hagen, physically overpowered and water-boarded to death by three refugees from Les Girls is ugly and depressing. Surely this is no way to partner the ravishing sounds that Inkinen and the MRO are summoning from the pit? Then a secret back curtain rises for the only time in the cycle and the crowd returns in an image that leaves you gaping in disbelief.

The curtain call with over 200 souls on stage (including the orchestra bearing their weird and wonderful noise-makers aloft) was deeply moving in itself, partly due to the afterglow of the closing bars, but also because of the sense of vast collective effort in this most massive of all live artistic endeavors.

Finally Opera Australia have a *Ring*, and this production by the country's finest theatre director with his brilliant creative team, and superb young maestro Pietari Inkinen with his equally remarkable band, is one of which opera patrons and all Australians can be very proud.

Clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HL3VCKYHnGo>
<http://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/Article/365556.live-review-q246tterd228mmerung-opera-australias-melbourne-ring.aspx>

Wagner: Lord of the Ring

By [Peter Bassett](#) on Dec 5, 2013

Not only a staggering work of imagination, Wagner's *Ring* Cycle also charts the vicissitudes of its composer.

Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* grew out of a single narrative idea: the circumstances leading to and surrounding the death of Siegfried. Its form is allegorical and deliberately so. Unlike Tolkien, who emphatically rejected any such dimension to his *Lord of the Rings*, declaring "It is neither allegorical nor topical... I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence", Wagner embraced the

concept enthusiastically. We might reasonably assume that a single allegorical thread runs through the four parts of the *Ring*. George Bernard Shaw – playwright, critic, Perfect Wagnerite and Fabian Socialist – certainly hoped so but was irritated to discover that in fact the *Ring* embraces not one but two or more quite unrelated allegories. It is to this multi-layering of ideas that we can ascribe much of the work's

richness and complexity, and also opportunities for stage directors to offer wildly divergent interpretations.



Richard Wagner: Portrait by Franz von Lenbach - 1894

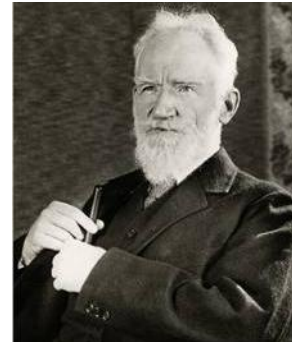
This multi-layering was undoubtedly an incentive for Wagner's complex use of *Leitmotiven* – musical motives or ground-themes associated with characters, objects, events and emotions to convey reminiscences or expectations in the course of the drama. The technique is used simply and directly in the preliminary evening, *Das Rheingold* (The Rhinegold) not only because the themes are being introduced there for the first time and need to be unambiguous, but also because the allegory is straightforward at that point. However, by the time we reach *Götterdämmerung* (The Twilight of the Gods) the issues and references have become so complex that only the most sophisticated handling of the musical material can do it justice. As a result, in this the final part of the Ring, western polyphonic music reached a level of complexity never achieved before and rarely since. In the process, Wagner's intention of according text and music equal dramatic weight was abandoned as the music, and especially the orchestral music, became the primary vehicle for the drama.



The failed Dresden uprising of May 1849

In Shaw's opinion, the political allegory recognisable in *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie) and the first two acts of *Siegfried*, could not be applied to the final parts of the cycle. He was convinced, rightly I think, that the widespread political unrest in Europe in the 1830s and 1840s, and especially the failed Dresden uprising of May 1849 in which Wagner had been involved, had been catalysts for the composition of the Ring. With his socialist hat on he also identified Siegfried as an anarchistic hero and destroyer of the power of the ancien regime, including the power of religion. He equated Siegfried with the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, a close associate of Wagner in Dresden in the 1840s, and in this he was echoing Friedrich Nietzsche who, in his 1888 essay *The Case of Wagner*, wrote: "Wagner had believed in the Revolution all his life... So he searched through all the mythic runes and believed that in Siegfried he had found his perfect revolutionary."

Shaw's problem with *Götterdämmerung* arose partly because he detected in its text and music an 'operatic' quality that seemed to him regressive. More importantly, the death of Siegfried/Bakunin in the final drama, and the pre-eminent, redeeming role given to Brünnhilde were hardly compatible with his notion of the heroic destroyer of the old order and herald of the new. Shaw tried to explain why Wagner had seemingly abandoned Siegfried, but his explanations do not ring true.



George Bernard Shaw

No one could doubt Wagner's revolutionary credentials, demonstrated on a number of occasions before he began work on the *Ring*. In 1830 for instance, he had sympathised with the Polish uprising against the Russians and was later inspired to write the overture *Polonia*, modelled on Beethoven's *Egmont*. He began but did not finish two works with themes relating to the French Revolution and its aftermath. He had escaped arrest in 1849 by fleeing to Switzerland, but his involvement in the Dresden revolution had on-going repercussions which continued after 1864 at the Bavarian court of Ludwig II. The young king was besotted with Wagner but his Prime Minister Ludwig von der Pfardtten had been a minister in the Saxon government in 1849 and regarded the composer with the greatest suspicion. Pfardtten's fears had some justification.

In 1851 Wagner had told his friend Kietz: "I am now giving much thought to America... My entire politics consists of nothing but the bloodiest hatred for our whole civilisation, contempt for all things deriving from it, and a longing for nature... It all stems from our servile attitude... In all Europe I prefer dogs to those doglike men [of the failed revolution] ... Only the most terrific and destructive Revolution could make our civilised beasts 'human' again."

What Pfardtten and others did not know was that after the mid-1850s, the composer's philosophical outlook had undergone a profound change. The effects of this can be seen in his handling of the *Ring* after 1854 and, particularly, in his approach to the character of Wotan. One practical consequence was the need to recast the ending of the entire work to bring its diverse and sometimes conflicting themes together in a convincing way.

Wagner's revolutionary inclinations were not confined to the political sphere. The ripples from his most radical work, *Tristan und Isolde* would be felt in symphonic music as well as opera, and indeed other art forms, half a century after its completion in 1859. *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, completed in 1874 after decades of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, broke new ground in almost every sphere of operatic practice, and the composer personally supervised the building of an equally revolutionary theatre in which to stage it.

Paradoxically, the *Ring*, which is the most complex and costly work in the operatic repertoire, was originally intended as a free community event in the style of the ancient Greek festivals at Epidaurus and Delphi. In exile in Switzerland, Wagner estimated that he would need about three years to write his

festival drama based on the old Nibelung poems and the legends of Siegfried. His plan at that time was to give three performances in a temporary wooden theatre in a meadow outside Zürich, after which the theatre would be pulled down, and that would be that. Needless to say, things did not work out quite this way and 26 years elapsed between the first sketches and final notes of the Ring. At the first complete performance – not in a Zürich meadow but at Bayreuth – the audience was hardly representative of the common folk, including as it did two emperors, two kings, two grand-dukes, various princes and numerous members of the aristocracy. Even Wagner had to admit that the gulf between his original plans and their ultimate realisation was enormous.

At first glance, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* appears to be a mythical story about a golden ring that is made, lost, cursed and coveted by Alberich the Nibelung. However, the work is much more than a mythical tale. It combines allegories of politics and power, of love and vengeance, of humanity's struggle for a better world, and of the psychological forces that shape our goals and determine our actions. It seems incredible that anyone would attempt to put all of this on stage, let alone set it to music.

It is difficult to separate the origins of the Ring from events in post-Napoleonic Europe when rival forces were attempting, on the one hand, to restore reactionary systems of government (think of them as the gods) and, on the other, to establish new systems of capital ushered in by the industrial revolution (think of them as Alberich and his ilk). The result was a chain of political uprisings and the publication of radical ideas by 'Utopian Socialists' like Proudhon, 'Scientific Socialists' like Marx and Engels, and 'Collective Anarchists' like Bakunin. In modern jargon, we'd call the young Wagner a left-wing radical, but one of a rather impractical kind. Bakunin summed it up well when he said: "I immediately recognized Wagner as an impractical dreamer, and although I talked with him about politics... I never committed myself to any joint action with him."

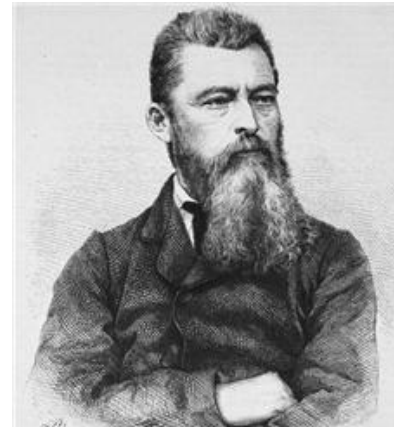
As a young radical, Wagner argued that the basic goodness of human beings had been subverted by the property-owning classes and the selfish interests of the state. In this he was echoing the ideas of the French philosopher and socialist Proudhon who famously asserted that property is theft. And "what a thief steals you steal from the thief", advises Loge in scene two of *Das Rheingold*. But whereas Marx and Engels saw the future of human society in terms of the emancipation of the proletariat, Wagner saw it in terms of the redeeming power of love. This was a view of the world that owed much to the writings of the contemporary German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, to whom Wagner dedicated his important essay of 1849 *The Artwork of the Future*.

People who knew the young Wagner in his Dresden years were impressed by his lively intellect and high-mindedness. In March 1849, the actor Edward Devrient made the following entry in his diary: "Met Kapellmeister Wagner on the Terrace; another discussion about his theories for changing the world. He still thinks that only by destroying property is it possible to civilize mankind... He thinks of putting an end to all deficiencies, believes in the absolute and original perfection of the human race – a perfection lost only as a result of the state... Finally he had to agree with me that only moral amelioration can put an end to our misery and that this would produce the right types of state, based on the law of love."

In one sense therefore, the *Ring* can be understood as an extended love story. Love is the thread that binds the whole work together – not love confined to a single pair of individuals

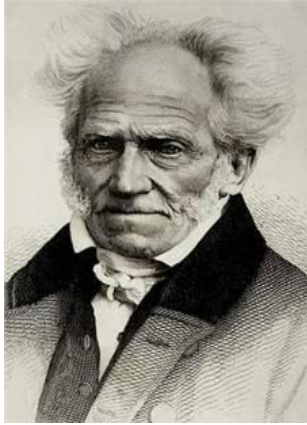
but love as the alternative to hatred and revenge, power and property, greed and envy. The story begins with love's renunciation and ends with its triumph as the one irreplaceable, transforming ingredient in a new world order. The supremacy of love over the law became Wagner's motto in his early sketches for the *Ring*, and he never entirely abandoned it. It provided the rationale for the union of Siegmund and Sieglinde in the first act of *Die Walküre* and the confrontation between Fricka and Wotan in the scene that follows. Wagner once told Franz Liszt: "The state of lovelessness is the state of suffering for the human race... we recognize the glorious necessity of love... and so, in this way we acquire a strength of which natural man had no inkling, and this strength – increased to embrace the whole of humanity – will one day lay the foundations for a state on earth where no one need yearn for the other world, for they will be happy – to live and to love. For where is the man who yearns to escape from life when he is in love?"

The unprecedented social transformation brought about by the industrial revolution in the mid-19th century had had a Dickensian dark side (Dickens was just a year older than Wagner): the mind-numbing toiling of men and the servitude of women and children in the workhouses, factories and mines. And behind everything stood, as it were, Alberich, who was prepared to renounce love in order to acquire power and wealth. Wagner's despair at the apparent triumph of the forces of greed, materialism and artistic shallowness caused him to write to Liszt in 1854: "Let us treat the world only with contempt, for it deserves no better; but let no hope be placed in it, so that our hearts be not deluded! It is evil, evil, fundamentally evil... It belongs to Alberich: no one else!! Away with it!"



German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach

George Orwell in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* describes a world founded on hatred, fear and the intoxication of power. He wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1948, exactly a hundred years after Wagner's first sketch for *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. In the oppressive world of Big Brother we recognize the world of Alberich, the Nibelung. A century before Orwell, Wagner was warning of the rise of totalitarianism and the pursuit of power at the expense of love. We know this from several sources, and especially from his essay *The Artwork of the Future* in which he expressed the view that the earliest societies arose naturally out of humanity's instinctive need for mutual love and fellowship. But later, he said, authoritarian states arose unnaturally, out of none of humanity's instinctive needs, being imposed by the few on the many. The authoritarian state was, he said, a crime against human nature, and therefore against nature itself. "A crime against nature" – the starting point for *Das Rheingold*.



Arthur Schopenhauer

In September 1854 Wagner was introduced to a book that became vastly important to him: *The World as Will and Representation* by the contemporary German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Up to that time, his philosophical outlook had been what he described as the “cheerful Greek view” of the world, but Schopenhauer’s thesis was that the world as we recognise it is merely a representation – a perception assembled by our senses. To put it another way, we perceive the world as a presentation of objects in the theatre of our own mind. Schopenhauer’s writings made a huge impression on Wagner and they continued to influence his thinking for the rest of his life. In many respects he had been trying, in his own way, to explain quite similar ideas. One can see this in his writings and his music. Now at last he had found a coherent, theoretical explanation of what he had recognized intuitively. Schopenhauer called the essential, metaphysical nature of each thing, its ‘Will’. In the case of human beings, this ‘Will’ manifested itself in our perpetual wanting, striving, and yearning – a process leading inevitably to disappointment because the things that we strive for belong to the world of phenomena and are ephemeral. The only possible remedy for our unhappiness is to cease wanting, to stop desiring; in other words, to renounce the world of phenomena. Wagner noted the relevance of these ideas to his Nibelung dramas and, in particular, to the character of Wotan. Never before had opera explored such issues. This was no longer opera as entertainment; this was opera as revelation!

In his earliest drafts for Siegfried’s Death, Wagner had intended to make the hero Siegfried the central character of his drama. But as the story evolved it became clear that the central character was really Wotan. All that happens in the *Ring* can, in a sense, be linked to Wotan’s needs, his ambitions, his weaknesses and, eventually, his willingness to bring about his own end. Wagner described him as embodying “the sum of the intelligence of the present”. Yet, for all his hard-heartedness and suppressed emotion, Wotan undergoes a strange and moving process of self-discovery in the second act of *Die Walküre*. Trapped in a political and moral quagmire, he begins to accept the inevitability of his demise and the end of the gods. Ultimately, it is only by extinguishing the craving for power and wealth and other worldly desires that humanity can be transformed. But to reach that philosophical point, Wagner had to move a long way from the rather straightforward political allegory of 1848, and he did. It was this shift that Shaw found so difficult to reconcile with his notions of what had motivated Wagner to write the *Ring*.

In the third act of *Siegfried*, Wotan, now merely observing events in the guise of the Wanderer, welcomes the end of the gods and bequeaths the future to the young Siegfried who does

not know him but is destined to awaken Brünnhilde. She in turn will save the world. We know what Shaw had made of Siegfried, but what should we make of him in this day and age? Modern opinion is inclined to regard heroic figures with cynicism – a reaction perhaps to the disastrous consequences of political hero-worship in the 20th century. As a result, many stage directors are inclined to transform such characters into anti-heroes. This is not difficult in the case of Siegfried, given that he is a naïve boy (and later, naïve man) raised in ignorance of other human beings, has no interest in the cursed ring other than as a love token, and is deceived, drugged, betrayed and eventually murdered.

Wagner’s knowledge of heroes derived from two sources: the myths of ancient Greece, and the sagas and poetry of Northern Europe. In both traditions, heroes exhibited god-like attributes which set them apart from non-heroic mortals and reinforced the view that they were superhuman. They often had gods as parents or grandparents. But Wagner came to the conclusion that the Northern European myths were in advance of the Greek because in them the heroes (whom he described as fully developed human beings) were increasingly displacing the gods. That is why we witness Wotan giving way to Siegfried in the third act of *Siegfried*, and why the gods play no role at all in *Götterdämmerung*, being merely figments of memory and imagination. Wagner described Siegfried as “a fearless human being, one who never ceases to love”. This is not how heroes are usually seen, and the description is a long way from the manipulated image of Siegfried as a symbol of national and racial superiority! Again, it reflected Wagner’s attachment to the ideas of Feuerbach who maintained that the gods were the creations of men, not the other way around. If the gods counted for nothing then so too did the god-like attributes of heroes. In a new humanistic world, the quality that would render heroes ‘heroic’ was their humanity.

Shaw’s misguided expectation that the *Ring* can be interpreted from a single perspective left him dissatisfied, as modern stage directors invariably are when they attempt a ‘one idea fits all’ approach. Shaw regretted that Wagner had not clarified his revolutionary inspiration by demanding contemporary costumes and settings: a tall hat for the Tarnhelm, factories for Nibelheim, villas for Valhalla, and so on. His description of the Tarnhelm, the magic helmet of transformation and invisibility is especially memorable: “This helmet is a very common article in our streets,” he wrote, “where it generally takes the form of a tall hat. It makes a man invisible as a shareholder, and changes him into various shapes, such as a pious Christian, a subscriber to hospitals, a benefactor of the poor, a model husband and father, a shrewd, practical independent Englishman, and what not, when he is really a pitiful parasite on the commonwealth, consuming a great deal, and producing nothing, feeling nothing, knowing nothing, believing nothing, and doing nothing except what all the rest do, and that only because he is afraid not to do it, or at least pretend to do it.”

When, in 1898, he made his observations about using contemporary costumes and settings, productions of the *Ring* were still firmly under the thumb of Bayreuth-centred arbiters of taste and design styles. The thought then of putting Wotan in a 19th-century frock coat or Brünnhilde in a Victorian riding habit would have been preposterous, but a century later such updating had become commonplace. Hagen and Gunther as captains of industry or Wall Street bankers; the giants as factory foremen; Loge as a spiv, are all familiar to modern audiences. It seems though that, as far as staged performances are concerned, we have passed the point where directors invariably think they can make sense of the *Ring*. As Patrick

Carnegy has observed: "Many have since come to think that this is simply no longer possible, and even that it has never been possible, so great is the discrepancy between Wagner's aim of creating a unified work of art and the fault lines in the completed work itself." Taken to its logical conclusion, this approach means that, sooner or later, what happens on stage will have no connection at all with what is happening in the music. The Bayreuth Festival may already have reached that point.

With some operas this might not matter too much, but the dilemma for admirers of the *Ring* is that, like the Woodbird in Siegfried, the orchestra plays an active role in contributing information. How can an audience marry what is heard with what is seen if the content of each bears no relationship to the other? The answer is that we shall then be experiencing something entirely different which might or might not deserve the appellation 'Wagnerian'. Did Wagner anticipate this, I wonder, when, in a moment of frustration during the first *Ring* rehearsals, he joked that having invented the invisible orchestra for his new festival theatre, he wished he could now

invent the invisible stage? Had he lived long enough to hear high fidelity, stereophonic sound recordings of his work's supremely expressive score, he might very well think that he had.



The Bayreuth Festival Theatre

http://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/Article/366349_wagner-lord-of-the-ring.aspx

Elke Neidhardt has died – 25 November 2013

By [Hallam Fulcher](#) on November 26, 2013

German-Australian actress turned opera visionary Elke Neidhardt passes, aged 72.



Elke Neidhardt:

German-Australian actress and opera director

German-Australian actress and opera director Elke Neidhardt has died, aged 72. She is perhaps best known for directing Australia's first complete *Ring* Cycle in Adelaide in 2004, a production that received wide critical acclaim.

Opera writer and dramaturg Peter Bassett, who worked alongside Neidhardt on the production, expressed his sadness at her passing: "I found her to be open to ideas and possessed of a strong sense of humour and style," Bassett said. "She was

determined to engage with audiences and, for her, boredom was a crime. She did not subscribe to the self-obsessed school of directing or the trend towards ugliness that disfigures many contemporary German productions."

"Her *Ring* was hailed as visually resplendent – and it certainly was. She was an opera director of real stature and a formidable personality. It is ironic that her death coincided with the Melbourne *Ring* Cycle. She will be sadly missed."

Born in Stuttgart in 1941, Neidhardt graduated from the State University of Music and Performing Arts Stuttgart, and later directed operas in Zurich, Amsterdam, Aix-en-Provence, Salzburg and Vienna. In 1967 Neidhardt moved to Australia, and the following year made her first appearance on television screens in the role of Anna Steiner in *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo*.

In the following decade, Neidhardt appeared in several other Australian television series including *The Link Men* (1970) and *Shannon's Mob* (1975). She also starred in a small number of Australian feature films, including *Libido* (1973), *Alvin Purple* (1973) and *The True Story of Eskimo Nell* (1975).

In 1977 Neidhardt was appointed resident director at Opera Australia, a position she held for 13 years. Following her tenure, she returned to Germany for six years to take on directorship at Cologne State Opera. In 2001 Neidhardt staged the Australian premiere production of *Parsifal* in Adelaide, followed by her celebrated *Ring* Cycle with the State Opera of South Australia in 2004.

Neidhardt is also particularly remembered for her provocative *Tannhäuser* for Opera Australia. Her *Il trovatore* for the Opera Conference, which has never been out of the repertoires of Australian companies, will be staged again by West Australian Opera in 2014.

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